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**The Philosophy of
Søren Kierkegaard**

Kierkegaard's View of Love

Sharon Krishek



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Elements in the Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard

edited by

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Abstract: The themes of love and loving are often, albeit not always explicitly, present in Kierkegaard's works. It is only his 1847 *Works of Love*, however, in which the topic serves as a central focus of inquiry. And while at first glance, this text may seem alien to Kierkegaard's poetic existentialism, revolving as it does around the commandment 'You Shall Love Your Neighbour as Yourself' rather than the drama of human existence and the mysteries of the human heart, the thesis that emerges is entirely existential: the capacity for loving is inherent to our very existence as humans. Focussing on *Works of Love* supported by a few short detours through other texts of Kierkegaard, this Element explores Kierkegaard's view of love as ultimately construing loving as a way of life.

Keywords: universal love, neighbourly love, romantic love, self, existentialism

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1 Introduction: Back to *Works of Love*, Yet Again

1.1 The Ongoing Relevance of Kierkegaard's View of Love (A Few Somewhat Personal Words)

Soon after the opening of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard wonders 'how could one speak properly about love, if you were forgotten, you, God of love?'¹ Less assertively, but in the same spirit, I feel it is relevant to ask: how can one speak about love, properly or at all, in times of war? How to write about love when reality seems to be dominated by the absence, and forgetfulness, of love: by the ruthless acts and decisions of those who shape our political reality and security and by the continuing and growing suffering being experienced as a result of an ongoing war?

Works of Love revolves around the biblical commandment: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'² This is the fabric out of which Kierkegaard's view of love is crafted. Yet, it feels like an impossibility. Ordinarily experienced as spontaneous and selective, love appears to be incongruent with such a request for universality. This is true in times of peace but is especially starkly so in times of war. Given that it *is* a time of war, the issue is not only theoretical. Those who believe in the validity of the commandment, as I do, face a challenge that is not only intellectual but also emotional.

Indeed, as many readers of Kierkegaard would (I dare say) admit, the engagement with his philosophy always has a personal side to it. It certainly does for this particular reader and this particular Element. Simply and quite bluntly, I therefore attest that war has in fact made me understand Kierkegaard's view of love better. Within the turmoil of horror, fury, fear, frustration, and, above all, deep and unrelenting sorrow, the task of *Works of Love* – which is to communicate the truth of the love commandment – became clearer to me.

And it is from this standpoint that I return to *Works of Love*, a text that I have been preoccupied with (as well as critical of), in myriad ways, for over two decades. My intention is to convey my new sense of clarity regarding the relevance and significance of Kierkegaard's view of love. It is a complex and nuanced view, which, while being rooted in the love commandment, also complies with the depth of our emotional world, accounting, thereby, for *all* kinds of love, including the romantic kind. This renewed endorsement, however, does not mean that I have become

¹ Kierkegaard (1995, p. 3). Hereafter, WL.

² Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39. Hereafter, I will refer to this as 'the love commandment'.

blind to, or willing to overlook, the faults I had previously highlighted in Kierkegaard's view: I am still cognizant of them. But at the same time, I find myself even more motivated to address them – as well as to revise, when relevant, my own misunderstandings with regard to his view. It is my hope that the result will be a coherent and satisfying view of love – true to Kierkegaard but, no less importantly, to both reason and experience.

1.2 Understanding (and Misunderstanding) *Works of Love*

These Christian deliberations ... will be understood slowly but then also easily, whereas they will surely become very difficult if someone by hasty and curious reading makes them very difficult for himself. (WL, 3)

Works of Love (1847) opens with an almost intimate appeal to the reader. Addressing itself to the 'single individual' (WL, 3), it invites us to 'deliberate' on love. As opposed to presenting the conclusions of a completed investigation, it is as if Kierkegaard encourages us to take an active part in his endeavour by *asking ourselves* what it means to truly love another person; another human being.³ To this end, the reader is asked to entertain a specific intellectual and emotional mood, to 'deliberate'. Kierkegaard is thus asking that we be open to, and patient with, his own process of deeply pondering on love. This request is not out of place because it is easy to misunderstand Kierkegaard's claims about love, or, at least, to be confused by them. Why?

Works of Love appears to develop its theory by relying on dichotomic distinctions: proper lover versus improper love, the eternal versus the temporal, the spiritual versus the earthly, Christianity versus poetry, equality versus preference, self-denial versus self-interest (and selfishness), duty and commandment versus spontaneous feelings and desires.⁴ Even Kierkegaard's own rhetoric wavers between seemingly contrasting tones: prosaic severity versus poetical tenderness. And all of this results in what too easily may seem like an attack on preferential love. What Kierkegaard means by 'preferential love', however, is not entirely clear. Straightforwardly, preferential love is the kind of love based on preferences. But what kind of preferences? If romantic love means (among other things) that I preferentially chose to

³ Although one may claim for a terminological distinction between 'person' and 'human being', I will not make such a distinction here and will use these terms synonymously throughout the Element.

⁴ This dichotomy may seem to reflect Nygren's well-known contrast between Agape and Eros (see Nygren, 1982). However, it is misleading to read Kierkegaard's view as a precursor to Nygren's or as an influence on it, as Kierkegaard's view is not akin to that of Nygren. See Hughes (2014), Davenport (2017), and Hanson (2022).

share my bed, my house, and my life with only one particular person – my spouse – there is evidently nothing wrong with that. Surely, in condemning preference Kierkegaard does not mean that I should non-preferentially share my bed, my house, and my life with everybody. The demand *not* to make preferences, then, regards the very act of loving. Loving my spouse in a romantic way is perfectly fine – as long as I love, in the appropriate manner, all those who are *not* my spouse as well.

However, Kierkegaard's issue with preferential love is not just the risk it entails of loving only those we love naturally or spontaneously. Rather, from his point of view, my spontaneous love for my spouse, as such, is problematic in itself. It is driven by self-interest. It 'seeks its own'. It is self-ish. Or so Kierkegaard often says throughout *Works of Love*. At the same time, the 'softer' side of *Works of Love* encourages us to love our spouses and friends deeply and tenderly – as long as we love them *properly*. Namely, *not* in the way praised by the poets, but rather in the way instructed by the love commandment. It is therefore clear that Kierkegaard perceives there to be two kinds of love: proper and improper. What is less clear, however, is where preferential love fits within this dichotomy.

This lack of clarity regarding preferential love is, in many ways, what makes *Works of Love* challenging to understand. In fact, it is the different possible interpretations regarding Kierkegaard's view of *preferential love* that are at the heart of understanding or misunderstanding this work. So how do different readers judge Kierkegaard's position with regard to preferential love? Is his position, in their judgement, one of condemnation and rejection, hesitant acceptance, or unequivocal endorsement?

As M. Jamie Ferreira explains in her seminal *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*, for many years this text had quite a poor reputation because it was understood to be promoting an ethics that 'precludes preferential love or puts it in conflict with neighbor love ... [and] is otherworldly, asocial, or acosmic'.⁵ Well-known critics such as Adorno, Buber, and Løgstrup understood Kierkegaard as presenting here an inhuman model of love, one that ultimately rejected spontaneous, preferential love.⁶ Ferreira's commentary is, to a large extent, a successful corrective to this incautious reading. In her close and careful engagement with the text, she not only directly refutes the objections raised against Kierkegaard but also positively demonstrates how *Works of Love* allows for an emphatically humanistic view of love. Ferreira's study thus marks

⁵ Ferreira (2001, p. 7).

⁶ See Ferreira (2001, in particular chapter 5).

a crucial turning point in the scholarly appraisal of *Works of Love*. This approach received further support from C. Stephen Evans' *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*. Published not long after Ferreira's book, Evans' text treats *Works of Love*, straightforwardly and unapologetically, as an obvious source for a desirable ethical view. As a result, Kierkegaard's position was now understood to be an unequivocal endorsement of love, including the preferential kind.

However, although Ferreira's corrective reading is apt, it goes too far in focusing on the 'softer' side of *Works of Love*, being, thereby, too dismissive of the austere conditions Kierkegaard demands we meet in order for our love to be proper. In doing so, an important question is left unacknowledged. While it is clear that Kierkegaard's explicit intention is to present a unified view of love that includes proper preferential kinds of love, it is much less clear whether his understanding of proper love allows for this. Given that he construes proper love to be, first, based on self-denial⁷ and, second, essentially equal⁸ – how can preferential kinds of love, which are neither essentially equal nor based on self-denial, fit into this model?⁹

Reading *Works of Love* post Ferreira's corrective, then, it seems important to address this question. Roughly speaking, the majority of those who engage with the issue of Kierkegaard's account of preferential love in *Works of Love*, although often acknowledging the challenge, tend more in the direction of Ferreira's approach, attempting to show how *Works of Love*, on its own terms, succeeds in presenting a coherent view of one, encompassing love.¹⁰ On the other hand, there are those who are less willing to discharge the tension inherent to Kierkegaard's understanding of preferential love. These scholars understand Kierkegaard's position with regard to such love to be, at best, only a hesitant (if not downright reluctant) acceptance of preferential love.¹¹

⁷ I will later explain what this means. (See in particular [Section 2.2.1](#).)

⁸ Which does *not* mean, please note, that one is expected to regard or treat every person in the same way, but *does* mean that what makes one's treatment *love* is the same in all instances. See Krishek (2017) for a detailed explanation of this point.

⁹ For both my affirmation of Ferreira's corrective attitude and my objection to her reading for disregarding what I take to be a genuine tension in Kierkegaard's view, see Krishek (2009, chapter 4).

¹⁰ See, for example, Lippitt (2012), Hughes (2014), Strawser (2015), Davenport (2017), Hanson (2022; 2023), Watts (2022), Elisher (2023), DeRose and Aroney (2025), and Evans (2025).

¹¹ See, for example, Krishek (2008, 2009, 2014, 2017), Carlsmith (2011), and in a sense also Compajen (2014), who, although on grounds other than the relation to preferential love, is critical of Kierkegaard's conception of neighbour love.

Although my position in the present Element aligns with the second strand, the motivation underlying it is more closely attuned with the first. Namely, my aim here is to demonstrate – entirely in accordance with Kierkegaard's position in *Works of Love* – how the love commandment is the key not only for proper love but also for proper *life*. And just like the advocates of *Works of Love*, I think that Kierkegaard provides us with an admirable and desirable view of love; one that is singular and all encompassing. However, unlike those aforementioned scholars, I do not think that this view can be found by reading *Works of Love* in isolation. Rather, to truly concur with the prospect that Kierkegaard presents in *Works of Love*, we must also take into account ideas that he presents elsewhere in his philosophy. The focus of this Element, then, is not to defend or object to *Works of Love* but rather to present its thesis while identifying the confusing and misleading elements in the text, as well as its lacunas. In doing so, my aim is to elucidate a satisfying view of love; one that adheres completely to Kierkegaard's task in *Works of Love*: to uphold the commandment to love one another.¹²

1.3 What Is *Works of Love* About?

To defraud oneself of love is the most terrible, is an eternal loss, for which there is no compensation, either in time or eternity. (WL, 5–6)

Kierkegaard begins *Works of Love* with declaring that the discussion that follows is ‘not about *love* but about *works of love*’ (WL, 3, emphasis in the original). This statement makes the reader wonder what, then, the book *is* about; why does Kierkegaard emphasize that its subject is *not* love but rather *works of love*? A little later in the text, Kierkegaard exclaims that ‘Christianity certainly knows far better than any poet what love is and what it means to love,’ and continues by drawing a further distinction: ‘erotic love ... is based on preference ... The Christian doctrine, on the contrary, is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference, nor of aversion’ (WL, 19).

¹² Thus, to emphasize, my criticism of Kierkegaard's view of love is not that I think he is wrong in making the love commandment the compass for loving, but rather that he presents too narrow an understanding of the commandment itself (as I explain in detail in [Section 3](#)). This emphatic endorsement of the love commandment as the basis for love in general – which is, again, entirely in line with the spirit of *Works of Love* – is new to my ongoing study of this text.

It seems, then, that on one side is situated love, the poets, and the kind of preference typical of spontaneous love such as romantic love and friendship, and on the other side are works of love, Christianity, and love for the neighbour (hereafter, neighbourly love). In light of this contrast, it may seem that Kierkegaard's opening assertion – i.e., that it is not 'love' but 'works of love' that interests him – is meant to distance his discussion from that of the poets and from the love that interests *them*. Accordingly, one may infer that the subject of this book is neighbourly love *as opposed* to preferential love (e.g., romantic love and friendship), with the latter being condemned as wrong or defective. However, as was suggested earlier, this is misguided: Kierkegaard's view is far more nuanced (and interesting) than that.

To understand Kierkegaard's view more accurately, we need to pay attention to the different possible applications of the term 'neighbourly love'. First, this term can be used to convey the idea of *universal* love; second, it can be used to designate love for those who are *not* the object of one's preferential love (e.g., the stranger, the enemy); and finally, it can be used as standing for the idea of *proper* love (as opposed to a morally defected one). Let me say a few words about each of these possible uses.

Neighbourly love as a synonym for universal love. Understood in this way, the term expresses the idea that every person deserves to be loved. To think of love as universal, then, is to accept that every person – every *neighbour* – should be the object of one's love and that different forms of love are a function of who the neighbour is in relation to ourselves. In this sense, romantic love is no less 'neighbourly' than love for the stranger or the enemy, since one's spouse is, obviously, no less a 'neighbour' than anybody else. Succeeding in loving *all* the neighbours in one's life – spouse, friend, offspring, stranger, and enemy – is therefore to adhere to the ideal of universal love. I suggest that when talking about 'neighbourly love', Kierkegaard primarily conveys *this* ideal. In any case, this is how the term will be used in the course of this Element.

Neighbourly love as a synonym for a non-preferential kind of love. This conception of the term posits that while there are people whom we do not love naturally or spontaneously, they nevertheless deserve to be loved in a 'neighbourly' kind of way. Accordingly, to think of neighbourly love as the kind of love we have for those we do *not* love spontaneously is to take neighbourly love to be a particular *kind* of love (distinguished from other kinds of love, such as romantic love and friendship).¹³ This conception of

¹³ This is how I previously understood Kierkegaard's application of the term. See, for example, Krishek (2008, 2017).

neighbourly love is guided by the (correct) understanding that the object of neighbourly love is the neighbour and that when we have no special relation to a person – she is not our spouse, friend, or daughter – we should love her, at the very least, as a neighbour. However, given that *everybody* is, in this sense, a neighbour – including one's spouse, friend, or daughter – such a usage is confusing. Hence, I suggest that we call the kind of love that is non-preferential (i.e., love for those with whom one has no special relation) – fraternal love. This is the kind of love we have for a person solely by virtue of our common personhood.

Neighbourly love as a synonym for proper or moral love. Here the term is understood as meaning that any kind of love (romantic, parental, fraternal) can be either proper or improper and that for love to be proper, the beloved should be loved as a neighbour. In other words, to think of neighbourly love as the manifestation of love at its best is to maintain that whenever one loves one's spouse, or friend, or enemy *as a neighbour* – by responding to the beloved's being a person – this safeguards the morality of love. However, to safeguard the morality of love, as we shall see, is a complicated and demanding affair. For example, even if one succeeds in loving the stranger or the enemy¹⁴ – responding, thereby, to them being a person – this in itself does not as yet guarantee that one's love (for the relevant stranger or enemy) is proper. Hence, to denote *proper* love, I propose to use the term 'spiritual love', or 'love of the spirit'. My reasons for this will become clearer as we continue our discussion.

Kierkegaard (as well as his interpreters) is interested in – and wavers between – these three aspects of neighbourly love (universality, love for those who are not related to us, and proper love). It is also clear why he chooses to think of the ideal in terms of 'neighbourly' love: after all, the commandment is to love our *neighbour*. However, conflating the three aspects into one single notion, although understandable, is nevertheless misleading. As we have just seen, while universality, fraternity, and propriety are all indeed embedded in the concept of 'neighbourly love', they are three distinct, separate ideas. While love should be universal – it should be addressed to each and every neighbour – this does not mean that all neighbours should be loved in the same way – i.e., with the same kind of love – and, further, the universality of love in itself does not as yet make love proper. Thus, it is not only that every neighbour should be loved, but every neighbour should be loved with the *relevant kind* of love (romantic, parental, fraternal, etc) in a *proper* (moral) way.

¹⁴ The sense in which we can *love* the stranger and the enemy will be clarified in the sections to come.

Given the importance of distinguishing between the three aspects of the love ideal, I believe it is helpful to keep these distinctions clear and to use, as explained, (1) ‘universal love’ to denote the ideal of having every human interaction (with any given neighbour) be an interaction of love¹⁵; (2) ‘fraternal love’ to denote the kind of love for those who are not related to us in a preferential way; and (3) ‘spiritual love’ to denote proper love.

With this in mind, we can return to the ‘dichotomic’ quote cited earlier. We can now understand that when Kierkegaard contrasts ‘erotic love’ which is ‘based on preference’ with ‘[t]he Christian doctrine’ that instructs us ‘not to make exceptions’, what he is seeking to convey is the ideal of universal love. Accordingly, given that romantic love has special features that *cannot* be universal (e.g., erotic desire), it cannot be taken as a model for love in general. It is in this sense that Christianity – with its focus on universal love – ‘knows far better than any poet what love is and what it means to love’ (WL, 19). Kierkegaard’s issue with the poets, then, is *not* rooted in their fascination with romantic love, and it is not the case that he wishes to reject romantic love as essentially improper. Rather, his reservation is rooted in the poets’ conception of romantic love (and friendship) as the model for *all* love, as well as in their failure to appreciate romantic love as *spiritual*.¹⁶ The poets, according to Kierkegaard, present a mistaken conception of romantic love, and therefore, if we wish to understand what *proper* romantic love is, we must inquire into its spiritual basis.

Further to this idea, when Kierkegaard says that his book is not about love but about works of love, I think he means something deeper than a simple dichotomy between poetry versus Christianity, or romantic love versus fraternal love, or feelings and passions versus moral actions. Rather, the distinction between ‘love’ and ‘works of love’ is akin to the distinction between potential and actualization. In this reading, love is a mysterious driving power that manifests itself through its actualization in different – emotional, moral, inward, outward, mental, physical, and interactive – *acts*, i.e., works. And Kierkegaard’s crucial point is that this potential originates in each human being’s unique (ontological) relation to God: their being created by God and in God’s image.¹⁷

Thus, in order to understand the true nature of love and, even more importantly (from Kierkegaard’s perspective), how to love properly,

¹⁵ In my understanding, *this* is the ideal expressed in the commandment, and the heart of Kierkegaard’s view of love.

¹⁶ The meaning of ‘spiritual’ in this connection will soon be explained.

¹⁷ For a textual defence of the potential-actualization interpretation in this context, see my analysis of *Works of Love*’s first deliberation in Krishek (2010).

we need to conceive of love as a spiritual phenomenon. Namely, we have to realize that the potential – the driving force of love – is not a matter of biology (i.e., reproductive or evolutionary drives) or psychology (i.e., emotional inclinations), but, first and foremost, it is a matter of our nature as connected to God. In Kierkegaard's view (as I will demonstrate), humans are not only physical and mental creatures, but they are also spiritual – with 'spirit' denoting the connection to God. In other words, whether they acknowledge this or not, humans *are* spiritual beings by virtue of their being created by God and in God's image. And the hallmark of this connection to God is the human ability to love. That is, loving – as an ability, a driving force, and a potential – is rooted in our connection to God and reflects what is most essential to us as humans. Loving, then, is the quintessence of our humanity.

In light of this, Kierkegaard's strong assertion that opened this section becomes clearer. 'To defraud oneself of love' means to prevent oneself from properly actualizing what is deepest and most intrinsic to human nature. To work against oneself in this way is 'most terrible' because it is to work against what one, essentially, is. In this sense, we can understand Kierkegaard's references to the eternal ('eternal loss', 'in ... eternity') – here and more generally – not only in a theistic way but also in a more neutral philosophical-metaphysical way. Inasmuch as 'eternal' expresses something independent of time, it captures the philosophical conception of 'essence'. The essence of being human – rather than being, say, a tree – is not something that develops in a person during their lifetime or depending on circumstances. Accordingly, we can understand Kierkegaard's characterization of the human being as not only physical and mental but also spiritual, as equivalent to a metaphysical view that takes humans to possess an essence that is prior (by definition) to their physical and mental state.

We will return to this idea when discussing selfhood in [Section 3](#), but for the time being we can explain Kierkegaard's strong assertion regarding the 'most terrible' loss entailed in preventing love from ourselves as simply meaning the following. It is essential for us to love (and seek love); this is what makes us human. Hence, to prevent ourselves from fully experiencing this is not only to make our lives poorer – it is to offend our very humanity. And if so, then of course it is crucial to understand how one *should* love; namely, how to love *properly*. And this is what *Works of Love* is about: it focuses on the love commandment – 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' – which, in Kierkegaard's view, instructs us how to actualize our love potential in a way that does justice to what loving truly is.

2 In Praise of Universal Love

2.1 Preliminary Clarifications

At the heart of *Works of Love*, then, is the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. It is based on this commandment that Kierkegaard constructs his claim that if one desires to love *properly*, one must not love in the way that comes naturally to us (namely, selectively and spontaneously) but, rather, as we are instructed to by the commandment (namely, universally and by way of self-denial). At first blush, this exhortation sounds not only alien to our experience but even mistaken: how can *love* be commanded? Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate in this section, such an understanding of love is not only defensible but also desirable. Before doing so, however, a few clarifications are in order.

Firstly, while the object of our love, according to the commandment, should be each and every person, this does not mean that we are expected to widen the circle of our love so that it actively includes every person on earth; such a demand is, obviously, impossible to meet. Rather, as Kierkegaard says explicitly, our duty is to love the people we see (WL, 154). In other words, any *interaction* – extensive or minimal, physical or mental, real or imagined – that we have with *any* person should be an interaction of love.

Secondly, as the greatest challenge to universal love seems to be love for one's enemy, it is important to clarify that the enemy is not only, and not necessarily, the person we meet in the battlefield. In other words, the enemy is not only the person who threatens our *physical* life, but also one who threatens our *way* of life. For example, political leaders or their supporters, who oppose and reject the values we hold dear, can be just as bitter enemies as those who are trying to kill us.

Thirdly, it is important to understand what the commandment does *not* demand. The requirement to love does not, by any means, nullify or disregard the requirement to pursue justice, and it does not necessarily imply pacifism. Thus, if X is someone who has done wrong to or inflicted harm upon us, the demand to love X does not mean ignoring that wrongdoing or conceding to it. Loving X is compatible with judging X, punishing X, and, if necessary, fighting X.

Fourthly, an important part of the commandment is the lover's *self*-relation, namely, to love the neighbour *as yourself*. Kierkegaard, however, does not elaborate explicitly on this element of the commandment. As will become clearer below (see [Section 4](#)), in his view a proper (or improper) relation to oneself is embedded in – and thus inseparable from – one's love

for the beloved, so that his analysis of the latter is *eo ipso* an implicit analysis of the former.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that the demand to love X as yourself does *not* mean loving X as if X were you. Rather, it means (I suggest) loving X as if *you* were X: that is, in the same way that you would want to be treated if you were in X's place. In other words, the demand is to imagine ourselves in X's shoes (as it were) and to regard X in the same way we would have wanted to be regarded were we X.¹⁹

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that 'the neighbour' is not only the beloved – but also the lover. As Kierkegaard clarifies by referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan, 'Christ does not speak about knowing the neighbor but becoming a neighbor oneself' (WL, 22). The point, then, is that one has to be a neighbour in order to recognize the other as a neighbour and to love the neighbour. There is a strong connection between loving the neighbour and becoming a neighbour; between relating properly to the other and relating properly to oneself; between loving another and becoming oneself. We will consider this connection at length in the sections to come.²⁰

2.2 The Love Commandment: Its Strength and Attainability

The ideal that the love commandment expresses, that is, universal love, may seem unattainable. And the challenge concerning its attainability is, in fact, twofold. First, one may claim that the very idea is incoherent: that there is a contradiction between the concept of love (which implies exclusiveness – a unique relationship with only a few) and universality (which demands inclusiveness – hence, seemingly, a relationship with all). Second, even if we agree that we can love every person *in principle*, it is

¹⁸ On Kierkegaard's understanding of self-love and self-relation, see Aumann (2013), Green (2013), Lippitt (2013), Piety (2015), Walsh (2015), and Triphon Reshef (2025).

¹⁹ Please note that my claim here is not that empathy for X is necessary for loving X: in what follows I distinguish between empathy and compassion and claim that only the latter is necessary for love. Rather, my suggestion is a more modest one. I claim that the 'as yourself' aspect of the commandment attests to an effort on the side of the lover to will good for X (as opposed to harming or offending or being indifferent to X) – just as we, ourselves, would want, in all circumstances, to be treated.

²⁰ The lover being a 'neighbour' themselves clarifies the moral status of self-love (when proper). In what follows, I present a conception of love as a caring that essentially involves both compassion (see Section 2.2.1) and joy (see Section 3.1.2), and having this in mind we can understand what loving oneself properly may amount to. It is to care (namely, will good) for oneself, to have compassion for oneself (namely, to acknowledge one's limitedness and weaknesses and respond appropriately), and to find joy in the presence of oneself. What does *this* mean? It means to acknowledge and accept one's value and strengths: to be delighted – or at least content and appreciative – of who one is. Such an acceptance, as we will see later in this Element (see Section 4), is crucial for becoming oneself. In this sense, there is also a connection between self-love and self-realization.

still questionable whether we can do this *in practice*. In the present section I will address the second challenge; as for the first, I will say a few words on it but address it only in the sections that follow.

2.2.1 The Practical Attainability of the Ideal

The question ‘can we love every person?’ cannot be answered before addressing the question ‘what is love?’ And although, as will become clear below, Kierkegaard’s view of love is not without flaws, there is much to be learned from it. It is on this that I now wish to focus.

Kierkegaard does not explicitly formulate (neither in *Works of Love* nor at all) the question ‘what is love’, but his discussion in *Works of Love* makes it clear that he takes love to be a kind of *caring* (as opposed to, say, an emotion or a valuation).²¹ To care for X is to will the good for X, and, according to Kierkegaard (albeit only implicitly), what turns caring into *love* is that it involves emotion, or, more specifically, compassion. This is demonstrated by Kierkegaard’s appeal to the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable, a story about a traveller who goes out of his way, literally, to attend wholeheartedly to a suffering stranger, has long been used as *the* paradigm exemplifying the love commandment. And Kierkegaard, when referring to it, emphasizes the Samaritan’s *compassion*. What is compassion?

To begin with, compassion is a feeling: it arises spontaneously and is affective (rather than cognitive or volitional). We can say that the compassionate Samaritan feels sorrow accompanied by feelings of tenderness, openness, and warmth. Note that these latter feelings are not a necessary part of sorrow. The heartbroken lover, for example, is full of sorrow because her love is unrequited, but she is less likely to be overwhelmed by feelings of ‘tenderness, openness, and warmth’. Hence, while there are types of sorrow that generate a turning inwards into oneself – leading to seclusion and separation from others – compassion is the kind of sorrow that takes one out of oneself, so to speak, with the sorrower relating to another with feelings of tenderness and warmth.

Compassion, from the Latin for ‘to suffer with’, is a state of emotional identification with the sufferer. Hence, it is helpful to distinguish

²¹ For example, in the prayer that appears very near the opening of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard speaks of ideal love in terms of uncompromised giving to the beloved. Being motivated by the will to benefit the beloveds – namely, willing good for them – such a giving reflects caring. Some of the most eminent interpreters of *Works of Love* take Kierkegaard to understand love as caring. See, for example, Evans (2004), Ferreira (2001), and Furtak (2008, 2015).

compassion from two other similar states of emotional identification: sympathy and empathy. While much has been written about these two attitudes,²² a simple example will suffice to help clarify the point relevant for the present discussion.

To be *sympathetic* to X, I suggest, means to understand X's state from *my* point of view. Suppose, for example, that X was late to our meeting and as a result I was forced to change my plans, which was very inconvenient. However, I'm not angry because I'm sympathetic to X: being myself a person who is often late; I know first-hand the difficulty in adhering to time tables and how frustrating it can all be. As opposed to that, to be *empathetic* to X is to understand X's state by adopting *his* point of view, placing myself in his shoes, as it were. Returning to our example, suppose that I am a person who is never late; being punctual by nature, I simply cannot understand how people fail to accomplish such a simple – and important! – act as being on time. But X explains his state to me: he failed to wake up on time and, having left the house late, was stuck in a traffic jam and then couldn't find parking, and so on. To be empathetic means that I am able to understand his state – although alien to my own experience – by adhering to his point of view. We can therefore say that both sympathy and empathy are emotional states of identifying with another person that are rooted in an *understanding* of that person's mode of being.

Compassion, however, does not require this kind of understanding. Let us think, for example, about a truly nasty, even vicious, person – egoistic, cold-hearted, exploitive, sneaky, and also dangerous. I don't have, *nor should I have*, any sympathy for such a person when he commits a wrongdoing: I do not, and indeed cannot, understand his state. Nor do I have empathy for that person: I am unable (and unwilling) to put myself in his shoes. Nevertheless – so I claim – I should have compassion for him. Lacking, however, an understanding of this person's state, on what, then, is compassion based?

Unique to compassion (as opposed to sympathy and empathy) is that it is an emotional reaction to a distinctive state: that of suffering. Hence, the first condition needed in order for compassion for X to arise is X's suffering. However, this is not sufficient. We can imagine a situation in which X suffers and one's reaction to this is not compassion but rather gloating. 'Rejoice not when your enemy falls' (Proverbs 24:17), says the

²² See, for example, Darwall (1988) and Gibson (2016), as well as recent collections on sympathy from 2015, edited by Schliesser; on empathy from 2019, edited by Aguilar; and on empathetic emotions from 2025, edited by Ansell-Pearson and James.

Bible, reflecting the possibility of being joyful – rather than compassionate – in the face of the other person's suffering. Thus, the second condition for compassion to arise is that we *care* – i.e., that we desire goodness – for the person who suffers.

Now, if I am correct that Kierkegaard views compassion as the feeling that constitutes love (distinguishing it from a type of caring that is not love), this means that for love to be universal, compassion should be felt for everyone. But is this possible? To answer this question, we have to determine whether the two conditions for compassion – X being in a state of suffering and caring about X – are met in the case of *every* X in *every* situation. Let us now consider, independently of Kierkegaard's analysis, the validity of each.

First, suffering. We tend to judge X as suffering when X's state is that of apparent physical or mental pain. If that was *all* that suffering amounts to, that would have obviously ruled out the possibility of loving every person, because under this conception of suffering it is not true that every person suffers. However, I would like to suggest a wider conception of suffering. I posit that, in a deeper sense, every state of vulnerability – i.e., of limitedness, deficiency, and neediness – is a state of suffering. This, of course, is *not* to deny that there are different forms and levels of suffering. Rather, it is to suggest that vulnerability in and of itself is a state of suffering because it entails pain.

The claim that vulnerability entails pain can be understood in a weaker or a stronger sense. In the weaker sense, it is saying that vulnerability *reflects* pain, even when no actual pain (physical or mental) is present. This is so because vulnerability enfolds traces of actual past pain and imminent future pain. In that sense, to perceive the vulnerability of X is to encounter X as carrying pain from the past and bearing the dark promise of pain-to-come in the future. In the stronger sense, the claim that vulnerability entails pain is to regard the state of vulnerability as, in itself, a state of (actual) pain. After all, human vulnerability amounts precisely to limitations, finitude, and the constant experience of loss. It means that one is, essentially, in a state of absence, deficiency, and unanswered needs. And what does it mean to be in this state if not to experience pain?

Thus, whether in the stronger sense or only the weaker one, inasmuch as to be human is to be vulnerable, we can say that the human condition is that of suffering – the kind of suffering we can call 'existential'. The first condition for compassion is therefore met: suffering, if only on this existential level, is the constant companion of every single person. But what about the second condition: is every person worthy of caring?

Caring for X is to will good for X.²³ There can be various reasons for this kind of willing, one of which, I suggest, is the recognition of X as valuable. Let us again consider a simple example. Suppose that at the centre of town is a beautiful tree, so ancient that it was there even before the city was founded. This tree continues to flourish and poses no threat of any kind. It is easy to imagine that if a contractor were to decide to uproot the tree for the sake of a new building, you would not be indifferent. You would want to preserve what you judge as valuable; you would want to protect it. In other words, you would care for it. And what is true with regard to trees is equally true with regard to people that you perceive as valuable. Can every person, however, be considered valuable?

In the theistic framework of Kierkegaard's philosophy, the answer to this question is clear and simple. Every person is created by God, and everything created by God is valuable. Furthermore, every person is created in God's *image*.²⁴ What does this mean? At the very least, it means that to be a person is to possess some of the qualities that characterize God, such as rationality, freedom of will, creativity, and the ability to love. Regardless of the theistic context, we can agree that these qualities are valuable. And indeed, theists are not the only ones to judge humans as valuable; Kantians and humanists, for example, would agree with this as well. Thus, whether we call it 'God's image' or simply 'personhood' (or 'humanness' – as I, myself, would prefer to call it), this is a quality, unique to humans, that is composed of a set of other valuable qualities.²⁵ We may therefore agree that by virtue of possessing this quality, every person is valuable. As such, every person is worthy of our caring.

It seems, then, that the issue is settled. The two conditions for compassion – the suffering of X and X's worthiness – are met with regard to any

²³ What does it mean to 'will good' for the beloved? It is important to understand that the 'good' at issue is not necessarily what the beloved takes to be good. The beloved may well judge wrongly what is good (either for them or in general). And while Kierkegaard does not present a thesis – or even a definition – of what the good is, in the [last section](#) I will suggest that, in his view, willing good for the beloved is, ultimately, to will that the beloved will love. For the present stage of the discussion, however, we can understand the goodness in question more straightforwardly by appealing again to the 'as yourself'. It is very clear to a person what constitutes the minimal goodness they seek in any given situation: not to be harmed and to be treated with respect, kindness, and warmth. To will the good for the beloved, then, is to will that they will not be harmed and will be treated with respect, kindness, and warmth.

²⁴ For a defence of the plausibility of ascribing this assumption to Kierkegaard (as against positions such as Welz, 2016), see Krishek (2019).

²⁵ Thus, in the same way that a discernible colour C is a combination of other colours, such as D, E, and F, so (according to my suggestion) is God's image or 'humanness' a discernible quality, which is in itself composed of other qualities (rationality, creativity, and so on).

and every X by virtue of X being a person. We therefore have a reason to feel compassion for every human in every interaction. However, more often than not, we fail to do so. Why is that? Assuming that compassion is (spontaneously) provoked by both a *recognition* of a person's value and an awareness of his or her suffering, it is therefore the lack of such a recognition that prevents compassion from arising. After all, unlike ancient trees (for example), the value of people, as well as their vulnerability, is more difficult to discern – given that people often behave in ways that conceal both.

This is the time to return to the *commandment* aspect of the love commandment. As we said at the beginning of the discussion, the pairing of duty and love is alien to our experience: it seems strange and mistaken to *command* one to love. However, we can now suggest that what we are commanded to do is not to *love* but rather to set the conditions that enable love – as a caring that involves compassion – to arise spontaneously. And indeed, to return to Kierkegaard, central to his analysis of the love commandment is the concept of self-denial. Arguably, it is *this* that we are commanded to do: 'Christian love', he says explicitly, 'is self-denial's love, for which this *shall* vouches' (WL, 52, emphasis in the original). What does Kierkegaard mean?

Typically, we are bound to other people in a complex weave of interests, desires, expectations, and emotions. Often, a large part of this 'weave' centres around us. Without being necessarily exploitive or egoistic, it is simply natural for us to relate to the other person from the point of view of our interests and other self-focused attitudes. So, for example, we are driven and motivated, often unconsciously, by considerations such as 'what X gives us', 'why X is interesting for us', and 'what need is met in our interaction with X'. Or, to give another example, we see X through the prism of the history of our relationship with him or her; a prism coloured by our memories and anticipations. And, unfortunately, sometimes we tend to focus on the negative aspects of these interactions: on the ways in which X outrages us, threatens us, annoys us, or takes things away from us.

As against this, self-denial is a relating to X in a way that 'releases' X from that self-referential weave. It is, to use another metaphor, like cleansing from our perception of X any desire, tendency, or emotion that attaches X to us. When we succeed in 'denying' ourselves in this way, what we see in our conception of X is a *person*. Which means that we see, on the one hand, someone who is in God's image (or possesses humanness) and hence valuable, and, on the other hand, someone who is vulnerable and,

hence, suffering. Seeing *this*, compassion – being a spontaneous reaction to the suffering of someone we care about – will naturally arise.

Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that for Kierkegaard the object of the love commandment is not *love* – an emotional position that, as such, escapes our control – but rather *self-denial*.²⁶ In other words, the command is not to love but rather to deny oneself; this, unlike emotion, is subject to our will and therefore under our control. And we are thus commanded because self-denial generates the conditions for compassion to arise spontaneously in any interaction with any given person. Hence, if love *is* a caring that involves compassion (as Kierkegaard implicitly holds), then the first question regarding the attainability of the ideal – can we love, *in practice*, every person? – has a straightforward answer. Yes, we can – through self-denial.²⁷

2.2.2 The Ideal's Coherence

A possible objection to the demand to love universally could be structured along the following lines²⁸:

1. Love is, by definition, for a person we relate to as an individual.
2. We relate to a person as an individual only in the context of a personal relationship.
3. We do not – and cannot – have a personal relationship with *every* person.
4. Hence: We cannot *love* every person.

But doesn't our former substantiation of the idea that we can have compassionate caring for every person serve as a refutation of such an objection? The answer to that is no. The objector could happily accept the universality of compassionate caring because he would reject the identification between such a position and love. After all, in the preceding analysis,

²⁶ For a different position, compare Evans (2025).

²⁷ As I explain in Krishek (2025a), there are views that consider compassion to be not a feeling – as I suggest here – but a complex position (with affective aspect). Given that the conditions for compassion as a complex position are akin to the conditions that Kierkegaard posits for proper love, there is a case to suggest that proper love, for Kierkegaard, is in fact compassion (when understood as a complex position). This is my thesis in Krishek (2025a), but for the sake of consistency with regard to the understanding of compassion as a *feeling* (rather than as a complex position), my treatment here of Kierkegaard's view of proper love takes it to amount not to compassion but to compassionate caring.

²⁸ This, in fact, is the kind of objection discernible in Harry Frankfurt's discussion of love, when he writes that we should not confuse his conception of love as disinterested concern with the kind of disinterested concern we find in the context of charity and other acts we categorize as universal love. See Frankfurt (2004, pp. 43–44). For my response to Frankfurt's position, see Krishek (2019).

neither caring nor compassion is conditional upon relating to its subject as an individual. Our reaction of compassionate caring to, say, Jane, is by virtue of Jane being a person – valuable and vulnerable – and not by virtue of her being *Jane* in particular. Nevertheless, the objector’s position *can* be refuted – if we reject the second premise above and rather defend the opposite claim: namely, that a personal relationship is *not* required in order to relate to a person as an individual so that we can relate to *every* person, including complete strangers, as an individual. To do this, however, we first need to explore the concept of being a ‘self’, or an individual – and this we will do only in [Section 3](#).

2.3 Love as We Experience It, Or: The Ambivalence of *Works of Love*

Even supposing, however, that we can indeed relate to every person as an individual (regardless of having any prior personal relationship with him or her), one may still object to the idea of love being universal on the grounds that compassionate caring, even if directed at individuals, is not love. Hence, if love is not the same as compassionate caring, then demonstrating the universality of the latter is not enough for accepting the universality of love. There are two questions to address here. First, is love indeed different from compassionate caring? Second, if so, does the revised conception of love allow for universality?

These two questions will be answered in full in the [next section](#), but let us begin by examining the reasons to be reserved about Kierkegaard’s (implicit) identification between compassionate caring and love. One may claim – as I do – that while love perforce includes caring and compassion, compassionate caring alone does not fully capture the nature of love. To understand this claim, consider our experience of love. Love is a very rich phenomenon, and it is experienced in various ways and to many degrees. As a test case, we can focus on what is arguably the most alluring of all the kinds of loves: the romantic one. Is ‘compassionate caring’ an adequate description of this love?

Let us consider Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s celebrated novel *Jane Eyre*, whose relationship can be taken to be the quintessential expression of romantic love. If we understand love to be a compassionate caring, we must accept that the elements that turn Jane’s love for Edward *romantic* – her passion, desire, yearning, excitement, and so on – are inessential to her position as *lover*. In other words, if to love is to be compassionately caring, then other attitudes (such as being

passionate, and so on) are not a part of *love* but only contingent additions to it. However, from Jane's point of view (one may reasonably guess), to explain her passionate love for Edward in terms of compassionate caring alone would miss the point. It simply does not reflect – or reflects only very partially – her experience of love. After all, her attitude to Edward is experienced as *love* not only because it includes caring and compassion but also, and no less crucially, because it includes eros, passion, and excitement. In fact, it is these elements that make her romantic love *romantic*.

It is not surprising that for Kierkegaard these elements, so central to romantic love, are not perceived as integral to love. Inasmuch as in his view spiritual (i.e., proper) love is governed by self-denial, this leaves no real room for what he takes to be the opposite of self-denial: namely, 'the powers of immediacy'. As he says: 'What a difference there is between the play of feelings, drives, inclinations, and passions, in short, that play of the powers of immediacy ... and the earnestness of eternity, the earnestness of the commandment in spirit and truth, in honesty and self-denial!' (WL, 25). Positing 'play' and 'immediacy' on one side and 'earnestness' and 'eternity' on the other, Kierkegaard draws a picture in which the 'powers' that characterize spontaneous (i.e., preferential)²⁹ love – 'feelings, drives, inclinations, and passions' – are opposite to self-denial, the 'power' that he elevates as the essence of *proper* love.

But what is wrong with 'the powers of immediacy', according to Kierkegaard? Again, let us focus on romantic love – which arises spontaneously and is preferential in the sense of being directed at only one person – as a test case. Romantic (or, in Kierkegaard's terms, erotic) love is 'based on drives and inclination, preferential love' (WL, 44), while proper love is 'self-denial's love, and self-denial simply drives out all preferential love' (WL, 55). As explained in [Section 2.2.1](#), self-denial 'releases' the beloved from the 'weave' of the lover's interests. As such, it serves, we can say, as an 'antidote' against selfishness. Hence, it seems that for Kierkegaard the problem with 'the powers of immediacy' is that they are the basis for acting

²⁹ 'Preferential love' is the term that Kierkegaard uses to denote the kind of love that is not yet proper. He also refers to preferential love as being opposed to neighbourly love. However, this is misleading. Given that Kierkegaard allows for 'preferential' love – such as romantic love and friendship – to be proper, and given that the romantic beloved and the friend are also 'neighbours', the true opposition, as we already noted (see again [Section 1.3](#)), is not between preferential and non-preferential love, but rather between proper and improper love. For love to become proper, it has to go through a moral-spiritual process, which does not occur 'spontaneously'. Thus, to signify the difference between spiritual and non-spiritual love, it is more accurate to refer to the latter as 'spontaneous' rather than 'preferential'.

selfishly. Indeed, he says so quite explicitly: 'Even if passionate preference had no other selfishness in it, it would still have this, that consciously or unconsciously there is self-willfulness in it – unconsciously insofar as it is in the power of natural predispositions, consciously insofar as it utterly gives itself to this power and assents to it' (WL, 55).

The problem, then, is selfishness. The claim here is that romantic love (in being spontaneous and preferential) must be selfish because it is based on the powers of immediacy, with the latter involving 'self-wilfulness'. As such, it is necessarily selfish. Now, if Kierkegaard is correct in maintaining that to be 'self-wilful' is to be selfish, and to be moved by the powers of immediacy ('natural predispositions') is necessarily to act self-wilfully, then inasmuch as romantic love necessarily involves the powers of immediacy, then it is necessarily selfish. But is he correct?

To be selfish is to be motivated solely by the aim of advancing one's own interests, regardless of the interests of another person, and even at their expense. To compare: if to be *egocentric* is to posit oneself at the centre – in terms of willing and entitlement – as if there are no others (like small children often do), then to be *selfish* is to be fully aware that *there are* others, and yet continue to posit oneself at the centre. Understood in this way, we can see why to act self-wilfully is to be selfish. When one acts self-wilfully, one is guided by one's willing alone, and adheres only to that willing. In doing so, the willing of the other person (as well as the other person who wills) becomes marginal. Which is precisely the position of selfishness.

To be self-wilful, then, is to be selfish, but why claim that to be moved by the powers of immediacy is to act self-wilfully? Indeed, the powers of immediacy may lead (easily so) to self-wilfulness, but to claim that they *necessarily* do so is like claiming that eating is necessarily selfish because it is moved by a willing that concerns oneself.³⁰ But this is not the case. The one driven by the powers of immediacy is self-wilful, hence selfish, only if he or she is concerned *solely* with themselves – but why should we think that such self-exclusivity is integral to willing?

As opposed to Kierkegaard, then, I hold that the powers of immediacy, in themselves, are neutral. While they indeed involve strong willing, they need not be necessarily self-wilful. Kierkegaard's position with regard to the powers of immediacy, however, is ambivalent. On the one hand, as we saw, he seems to view the powers of immediacy as being selfish by nature.

³⁰ Kierkegaard himself makes it clear that Christianity 'has been no more scandalized by a drive ... than it has wanted to forbid people to eat and drink' (WL, 52). Nevertheless, his conflation of 'the powers of immediacy' with 'self-wilfulness' betrays that he does regard these powers as selfish.

On the other hand, he emphatically allows for the possibility of romantic love (as well as other forms of preferential love) becoming proper (i.e., not selfish). What, then, is Kierkegaard's view?

To claim (as Kierkegaard does) that the powers of immediacy are necessarily the powers of self-wilfulness, hence selfishness, leaves us with two options with regard to the propriety of romantic love. If the powers of immediacy are essential to romantic love, then romantic love is necessarily selfish (i.e., *not* proper). However, if we think (as Kierkegaard does) that romantic love *can* be proper, the implication is that the powers of immediacy are *not* essential to romantic love. This, it seems, is Kierkegaard's position, but it makes his account discordant with our experience: if we subtract from romantic love its yearnings, desires, and passions – namely, the powers of immediacy – with what are we left?

Given the close connection that Kierkegaard posits between self-denial and proper love, his ambivalence regarding the powers of immediacy – in which the self is asserted rather than denied – is easy to understand. However, Kierkegaard is ambivalent not only when it comes to describing the *lover's* position – namely, as either self-denied or self-asserted – but also when it comes to the way the *beloved* should be seen. That is, he is ambivalent about *both* the status of the lover's *powers of immediacy* and the beloved's *differentiating qualities*. The latter are those qualities that make the beloved different from (as opposed to being the same as) any other neighbour: what Kierkegaard terms 'dissimilarities'. Why is Kierkegaard reserved about the dissimilarities that distinguish one person from another?

'No person has ever lived,' he says, 'who is not dressed or cloaked in the dissimilarity of earthly life' (WL, 70). However, 'in the life of actuality one laces the outer garment of dissimilarity so tight that it completely conceals the fact that this dissimilarity is an outer garment, because the inner glory of equality never or very rarely shines through as it continually should and ought' (WL, 87). Kierkegaard's rhetoric reveals that he endorses yet another dichotomy, this time between 'earthly dissimilarities' and 'the inner glory of equality'. While acknowledging that the former is integral to being a person, he nevertheless marks it as inferior to the latter: to our shared 'inner glory', that is, God's image (or the quality of humanness).

Indeed, Kierkegaard is right that focusing on one's 'dissimilarities' may easily distract us from perceiving each other's (shared) humanness. The king, the beggar, and the enemy – are all human beings, who are a *king*, a *beggar*, or an *enemy* precisely by virtue of 'the dissimilarities of earthly life'

(WL, 68). Hence, if we want to see each as a *neighbour* – just as proper love (according to Kierkegaard) demands of us – we must ‘shut [our] eyes’, so that we ‘do not see’ those dissimilarities (WL, 68).

However, to claim (as Kierkegaard seems to be doing) that ‘earthly dissimilarities’ conceal who the person *truly* is implies one of two possibilities. It is either to say that all persons are essentially *the same* or to suggest that there are dissimilarities – other than the earthly ones – that do take a part in constituting who each person truly (and distinctly) is. Given that there is no hint for the latter possibility in *Works of Love*, we must conclude that Kierkegaard’s view is that what distinguishes us from each other is only an ‘outer garment’ that we should be careful not to lace too tightly.³¹

However, if we are all *essentially the same*, what makes each of us an *individual*? There is no doubt that Kierkegaard takes proper love to be directed at individuals – ‘for Christ, as for God’s providence ... the countless are counted, are all individuals’ (WL, 69) – but to be an individual is by definition to be *distinct* from anyone else, and what is it that distinguishes us from one another if not our dissimilarities?³²

Here one may claim that what makes X an individual is not intrinsic to X but rather the outcome of our *relation* to X. For example, there is nothing intrinsically individualistic in my reusable drinking bottle: we can find the exact same bottle in many stores. However, what makes *this* bottle my *individual* bottle – distinct from any other of the countless bottles available out there – is my relation to it (where and when I bought it, the special way it serves me, my memories and sentiments attached to it, and so on). But is the same true about people? Is their individuality a function of our relation to them? Not only does this sound morally dubious, it is, again, discordant with our experience, especially in the context of romantic love. It is not Jane’s special relationship to Edward that makes Edward an individual, but rather the opposite: Jane’s special (romantic) relation to Edward – and to him in particular, to him exclusively – is grounded in Edward being the individual that he is.

Thus, the two elements that Kierkegaard emphasizes as the hallmark of proper love – self-denial (which overcomes the powers of immediacy) and equality (which overcomes dissimilarities) – fail to reflect the nature of romantic love as we experience it. Romantic love as a test case, then, proves Kierkegaard’s model of love to be too narrow.

³¹ See the analogy that Kierkegaard draws between ‘earthly dissimilarities’ and an actor’s custom (WL, 87–88).

³² On the importance of individuality to love, see Furtak (2025b); on the value of the neighbour’s distinctiveness in *Works of Love*, see Green (2025).

3 In Praise of Romantic Love

[E]rotic love is undeniably life's most beautiful happiness. (WL, 267)

3.1 Kierkegaard's Model of Love: And an Alternative

3.1.1 The Narrowness of Kierkegaard's Model

As we have seen thus far, Kierkegaard presents a praiseworthy ideal of universal love. Every person, simply by virtue of his or her humanness, *deserves* to be loved and *can* be the object of our love. Hence, we should love every person 'that we see',³³ which means that each and every interaction should be one of love. But what *is* love? It is easier for Kierkegaard to assert what love is *not*: it is 'not a matter of drives and inclination, or a matter of feeling, or a matter of intellectual calculation' (WL, 143). Indeed, as we saw in the [previous section](#), for Kierkegaard love is primarily a matter of *will*. To love is to will the good for the beloved. By this I understand him to mean (as previously discussed) that love is a kind of *caring*; a caring that necessarily involves, as implied in Kierkegaard's analysis, *compassion*. However, such an account, we saw, is inadequate when addressing specific *forms* of love, such as, for example, romantic love. The concept of compassionate caring simply does not seem to convey our experience of *this* kind of love. As if he anticipated this sort of criticism, Kierkegaard says the following:

The worldly or merely human point of view recognizes a great many kinds of love and is well informed about the dissimilarity of each one and the dissimilarity between each particular one and the others. ... With Christianity the opposite is the case. It recognizes really only one kind of love, the spirit's love, and does not concern itself much with working out in detail the different ways in which this fundamental universal love can manifest itself. Christianly, the entire distinction between the different kinds of love is essentially abolished. (WL, 143)

We may call the model that Kierkegaard delineates here 'the embodiment model of love', according to which there is only 'one kind of love' – which

³³ Loving 'the people we see' is the subject of the fourth deliberation in *Works of Love*. Addressing the deep 'need of love' (WL, 154) and focusing its attention on love for those 'once given or chosen' (*ibid.*, 159, 166), this deliberation discusses love in terms closer to how we experience love. In this sense it may seem to offer the needed completion to the somewhat alienating rigidity of Kierkegaard's discussion of the love commandment in the second deliberation. (See, for example, Ferreira, 2001, pp. 100–102). However, as I demonstrate elsewhere (see, for example, Krishek, 2009, chapter 4), the fourth deliberation, despite its alleviating tone, does not offer the needed amendment to the narrowness of Kierkegaard's model.

is ‘fundamental’ and ‘universal’ – and all the other kinds or forms of love are its manifestations. That is, romantic love is one specific embodiment (among many) of the ‘one kind of love’, whose nature, as we learnt, is compassionate caring based on self-denial and directed at ‘the neighbour’. This implies that a position that does not meet these conditions – say, romantic love in its spontaneous form, which as such is not based on self-denial and does not necessarily discern the beloved as a neighbour – is not *love*. In other words, if the ‘embodiment model’ accounts for what love *in general* is, then it makes redundant the distinction between proper love and spontaneous love, given that the latter, according to the embodiment model, is not love at all.

This, however, does not ring true. In our experience, although we often fail to love properly, our flawed love is nevertheless love. For example, at the beginning of their relationship, Edward’s love for Jane did not meet the conditions for proper love: it was acquisitive and in many ways selfish. Edward did not deny himself and failed to regard Jane as a neighbour. However, to claim that it was not love is to completely misunderstand Edward’s state. Exegetically speaking as well, it is clear that Kierkegaard accepts a distinction between proper and spontaneous love when he asserts that ‘[l]ove had existed also in paganism’ (WL, 25) or that the commandment ‘will teach erotic love and friendship genuine love’ (WL, 62). Such assertions indicate that Kierkegaard allows that a phenomenon *L* will be considered love even if it does not meet the conditions for *proper* love. Moreover, if loving is essential to human nature,³⁴ it means that we, as humans, *must* love – even if, and when, our loves are far from proper.

Hence, ‘the embodiment model’ accounts *not* for love in general,³⁵ but only for proper love. Accordingly, I suggest that the answer to the question: ‘What is love, in Kierkegaard’s view?’ is that it is caring that involves emotions. Thus, spontaneous romantic love is *love* – even before the commandment transforms it into ‘genuine love’ – because it is a position of caring that involves emotions typical of romantic love. However, as already stated, Kierkegaard is not interested in the question of ‘what love is’, but rather in the question of ‘how to love properly’. And it is *this* question to which the embodiment model provides an answer. When we love properly, it does not matter if our love is romantic, parental, or for a stranger. What is common to all these forms is compassionate caring. And while *this* is the core, the

³⁴ As implied by our ‘God’s image’. We will return to this idea and explain it further later in this section and in the [next](#).

³⁵ As opposed to the view I had previously held. See, for example, Krishek (2017).

other elements that distinguish between the different forms – i.e., the ‘powers of immediacy’ of spontaneous love – are ‘essentially abolished’.

However, this brings us back to the test case of romantic love. Could Jane – as a romantic lover who loves her Edward properly – be satisfied with such an account? Wouldn’t she, rightly, object that an important part of her *proper* love for Edward is precisely that which makes her love *romantic* (as opposed to, say, brotherly) – her erotic excitement, for example, and tender contentment in his presence? As these elements cannot be based on self-denial, and as they are addressed exclusively to Edward as a distinct individual, there is no room for them in Kierkegaard’s model of love.

3.1.2 An Alternative Model of Love

I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you ... it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. (Brontë, 1994, p. 354)

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

Romantic love is a strange and wonderful thing. Two people, previously strangers to each other, become so closely and intimately connected, as if they were one. However, despite Kierkegaard’s poetic outlook that enabled him to see clearly the significance of romantic love (as the quote that opens [Section 3](#) reflects), his ‘official’ model of love is too narrow to encompass the beauty and uniqueness of romantic love. It does not, as was demonstrated, account for the important differences between various *forms* of love (romantic, parental, for friends, and so on) and thus fails to address the variety of love and its phenomenological richness.

The narrowness of Kierkegaard’s model becomes particularly evident when we try to address the nature of proper *romantic* love, as the prominent elements that are characteristic of this love – eros and selectivity – are not, and cannot be, a part of his model. When proper love is understood to be based on self-denial and responsive to the beloved as a *neighbour*, neither eros nor selectivity can be a manifestation of proper love. To stand the ‘romantic love’ test, then, Kierkegaard’s model of love needs to be broadened. A satisfying model must be able to account both for the various emotions typical of each form of love (say, eros in the case of romantic love) and for the particularity of the beloved – for him or her being not just a ‘neighbour’, but a *distinct and distinguishable* individual.

Hence, my suggestion is that love, both in its spontaneous form and in its 'spiritual' (i.e., proper) form, is a caring that necessarily involves not only compassion for the beloved but also, crucially, joy in his or her presence. By 'joy' I mean the kind of positive feeling one has when experiencing vitality (such as when dancing, listening to music, being engrossed in a good book, taking in a beautiful vista or piece of art, and so on). In that sense, to feel joy is to feel something like 'life power': it is when simply being alive, the 'bare' sense of living, is experienced as positive and desirable. If we agree that joy, no less than compassion, is the hallmark of love, this opens the door to the emotional richness of love. Because while compassion is qualitatively 'the same' in all loving interactions, joy is diversified: the joy in the presence of one's spouse is different from the joy in the presence of one's child, which is different from the joy in the presence of one's friend – and so on. Hence, while joy is essential to *every* interaction that is an interaction of love, the *kind* of joy (erotic, parental, amicable, and so on) is contingent on the type of interaction. It is this aspect of love, then, that accounts for the qualitative emotional difference between various forms of love.

The essentiality of joy to love is also directly connected to the way we see the beloved: not only as a neighbour but, rather, in his distinguishable particularity, that is, as *Edward*. After all, unlike compassion, joy cannot be provoked in response to general qualities such as 'being valuable' or 'being vulnerable', but rather requires a more personal element. Presumably, what elicits my joy in X is not necessarily what elicits your joy in X, and while we may both find joy in X, mine could be of the amicable kind while yours is of the erotic kind. In other words, when it comes to joy, both you and I must encounter X as an individual. Or, to put it differently, to be able to elicit my joy in X, it is not enough that I encounter X as a person or a neighbour – I must encounter X in the uniqueness of his or her individuality, which includes the *particular* qualities that provoke *my* joy.

In Kierkegaard's view, we saw love is caring that involves emotions, while *proper* love is caring that involves *compassion*. In the alternative view, on the other hand, love – both spontaneous and proper – is caring that involves compassion *and* joy. And while in Kierkegaard's view proper love is based on self-denial and conceives the beloved as a neighbour, in the alternative view, proper love *cannot* be based on self-denial *alone* and it conceives the beloved as a *distinct* neighbour. The two modifications for a revised model of love, then, are, first, the broadening of the position of the lover from self-denial alone to a 'double movement' of denial *and* affirmation; and, second, the broadening of the concept of 'neighbour' to the concept of 'individual' or 'a *self*'. Let us begin with the second modification first.

3.2 Broadening 'the Neighbour' to 'a Self'

As was already said, love is, by definition, directed at an individual. This is particularly evident when we think of romantic love: the kind of love that Jane has for Edward could not be transferred to any other neighbour. Hence, while the concept of 'neighbour' puts an emphasis on that which is *common* to all humans, to capture the individuality of, say, Edward, there is a need to address his *singularity* and that which differentiates and distinguishes Edward from everybody else. This is precisely what, to my understanding, Kierkegaard's concept of the 'self' does. And while the terms 'self' and 'selfhood' have more than one meaning,³⁶ in what follows I take the term 'self' to stand for individuality and, further, for *robust* individuality; being (as I will explain) *essentially* not just a person but a person with a (divine, eternal) name.

The analysis I rely on is the one that Kierkegaard presents in his treatise *The Sickness unto Death*.³⁷ Published in 1849, this text is notorious for its complexity and inaccessibility. I am not attempting here to untangle this text nor to defend my reading of it as against other interpretations.³⁸ Rather, my aim is to use the conceptual framework that Kierkegaard provides in this text in order to explain what it means to encounter a person as an individual and demonstrate that it is *this* kind of encounter that we find in the context of *love*; love of *any* kind.³⁹

What is the difference between encountering Edward as a person and encountering him as an individual, as a *distinct* person, as *Edward*? Although theoretically acknowledging that every person is different and has a distinct identity, when we encounter a person as Edward, we *experience* this distinctiveness; we single him out, 'seeing' him in his uniqueness. We may say that our *attention* is different. Such an encounter, or seeing, attends to the particular qualities that form his identity as Edward (as distinct, say, from John): his looks, his posture, his mixture of sternness and tenderness, his self-confidence, as well as other (more or less discernible) particular qualities that he possesses.

³⁶ At the very least, it also means 'inwardness', that is, the inner world that guides one's outward behaviour. However, elaborating on this meaning of selfhood is beyond the scope of the current project.

³⁷ Kierkegaard (1980). Hereafter SUD.

³⁸ This I do elsewhere. See, for example, Krishek (2022a, chapters 1 and 6), where I present a much more elaborate discussion of the ideas that are here presented only briefly and concisely.

³⁹ That is, not only romantic but also fraternal, which is, as explained in Section 1.3, love for those who are not related to us in a preferential way.

Recall the idea of possessing God's image (or the quality of humanness) that was introduced in [Section 2.2.1](#). It was suggested that this quality is made up of valuable *universal* qualities such as rationality, creativity, and so on. Further to this, I now want to suggest that Edward's selfhood – or individuality – is made up of *particular* qualities that best manifest, in Edward's case, God's image (or the quality of humanness). In other words, while in, say, Jane's case, it is perceptiveness that best manifests her rationality, in the case of Edward it is his quick thinking that does so. Hence, while perceptiveness is a part of Jane's 'God's image' – i.e., her individuality, her identity as 'Jane' – in the case of Edward, it is quick thinking that makes him (among other qualities) the individual that *he* is.

In his analysis of selfhood, Kierkegaard presents two key ideas that, taken together, may help explain the experience of encountering Edward not as a person (one among many) but as *Edward*.

The first is Kierkegaard's characterization of the human being as 'both eternal and temporal' (SUD, 13). What does he mean? By characterizing the human being as 'eternal', Kierkegaard may well be referring to the individual's possession of God's image. This quality (God's image) can be described as 'eternal' not only because it reflects the individual's relation to God ('the eternal'), but also because it stands for the human being's *essence*. That is, inasmuch as the possession of 'essence' means a possession of a quality that defines X as human – unchangingly and independently of time – it is fitting to describe it as 'eternal'. However, humans are also 'temporal'. *Unlike* God, they are limited: subject to loss and death, and with only limited possession of abilities and capacities. In other words, while God (arguably) possesses all the possible good qualities that manifest rationality, creativity, and so on, every human possesses only a few out of the vast pool of these possible good qualities (so that, to return to the aforementioned example, Edward is quick in his thinking but lacks perceptiveness).

To characterize humans as both eternal and temporal, then, can be taken to mean that humans are created in a particular, *limited*, shape of God's image. In this view, each person is created with a combination of particular qualities, unique to him or her, that best manifest *that person's* God image. Or, to put it in less theologically committed language, we can say that not only do humans possess an *essence*, but also each human possesses an *individual* essence. That is, in the same way that we recognize X as a person (as opposed to a cat or tree) because we recognize the quality of humanness that she possesses, so we will recognize X as Edward (as opposed to John or Jake) due to the quality of Edward-hood – the particular shape of his humanness – that he possesses.

The conception of individual essence – i.e., of being *essentially* Edward – may seem inconsistent with our experience of constantly changing and becoming, *contingently*, the Edward that we are. Here Kierkegaard's second key idea comes to our aid. In asserting that every human being is 'destined to become himself' (SUD, 33), Kierkegaard is suggesting, according to my understanding, that one's individual essence is primarily in a state of *potential*. And if so, it then requires *actualization*, which can be accomplished in various ways and degrees. So that although Edward can never become John – because he is *essentially* Edward – there are many *versions* of Edward that can come into being.

To recap, to be a self is to be an individual in the robust sense of the word; namely, it is to be essentially Edward and not merely a person or a neighbour. Which means that there is a set of particular qualities whose unique combination yields Edward's identity as *Edward* (as opposed to merely a person/neighbour) and which is *essential* to him, that is, constant and unchanging. We can think of this as the 'core' of being Edward. At the same time, this core of him exists in a state of *potential*. Think of a seed of an oak tree: it defines 'eternally' or essentially what the tree is like, but being a seed it is not as yet the oak tree that it is 'destined' to be. In the same way, there is a 'core' to 'being Edward' that defines him, but as such it is not yet the Edward he can be: the 'seed' of being Edward needs to be 'implanted' in the contingencies of actuality and, accordingly, can develop in different ways. To be Edward, then, is to be the potential *and* the actualization, and this (namely, being Edward) amounts to his individual essence. By 'essence', it should be clarified, I mean both in the rigorous sense of being constant and unchanging (this applies to the potential) and in the more 'softer' sense of being 'who he is' at a given time, hence subject to change (this applies to the actualization).

As opposed to the picture presented in *Works of Love*, the conception of being a 'self' allows that not only that which is *common* to humans will count as 'who a person truly is', but also that which makes every human the *distinct* person that he or she is. In other words, the concept of the self (as analysed here) makes it possible that that which *differentiates* Edward from other neighbours – namely, that which constitutes him as an *individual* – will be a part of his essence. Note that the concept of the self retains the idea of being created in God's image and of being a deserving-of-love neighbour, while simultaneously making distinctiveness an integral part of being a neighbour.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ While in *Works of Love*, recall, 'dissimilarities' are contrasted with what a person truly (i.e., essentially) is. See again [Section 2.3](#).

We may therefore say that there is a thinner sense to being a ‘neighbour’ (neighbour as a person in general) and a thicker sense (neighbour as a particular individual), with ‘self’ being a neighbour in the latter, thicker sense. And since it is this sense that coincides with our experience of love as being sensitive to differences and directed at an individual, the first modification to Kierkegaard’s model of love is to broaden the concept of ‘neighbour’, so that it is a *self* who is posited as the object of our love. And with this thick conception of the neighbour as a *self* in mind, we can now return to the challenge we posed in [Section 2.2.2](#).

The challenge, recall, is as follows. Given that love is by definition for an *individual*, is the demand to love universally at all coherent? Namely, is it possible to relate to *every* person as an individual, even if we do not possess any relationship with him or her? My emphatic answer is yes: we can relate to *any* person as an individual because the individuality of a person is *always* accessible to us. Hence, perceiving X’s individuality does not depend on having a close (or indeed any) relationship with X. Now, there is nothing mysterious or mystical about this accessibility – in fact, it is common to our experience⁴¹ – and the notion of the ‘self’ as previously defined provides the conceptual framework to explain this. To relate to Jane as an individual means to identify and experience her individual essence, namely, her quality of selfhood (both in its potentiality and its actualization). This quality, as was explained, is a combination of particular qualities that are, in principle, accessible to our mind and senses. For example, Jane’s perceptiveness shows itself in her facial expressions, her shyness expresses itself in her body language, her courage is manifested in the way she talks, and so on. Hence, when relating to Jane with attention and openness, we encounter her as *Jane*, an individual.

And if so, there is nothing incoherent in the ideal of universal love. It is possible to love – both in principle and in practice – every given person.

3.3 Broadening ‘Self-Denial’ to ‘Active Attentiveness’

The second modification to Kierkegaard’s model of love is motivated by the need to account for the phenomenological richness of love. As was explained, while self-denial is undoubtedly important for securing the morality of love (in its being a ‘tearing off’ of the lover’s web of

⁴¹ Just think, for example, of love at first sight: if the capacity to perceive a person as an individual *independently of having a relationship with them* was not natural to or inherent in us, then love at first sight – namely, love that precedes any relationship – would not be possible. But it is.

self-interested attitudes that hides a clear perception of the beloved), when the position is one of self-denial *alone*, it cannot include joy. This is because the latter emotion is self-assertive: it is a positive feeling of vitality, like a 'burst' of life power, that affirms the self who feels this way. Accordingly, it cannot be rooted in self-denial. Thus, inasmuch as joy in its various forms and expressions – such as the eros of romantic love, the tender delight of parental love, and the soothing pleasure of friendship – is an essential part of love, proper love cannot be structured as a position of self-denial alone. Accordingly, to include joy as an essential part of proper love, self-denial must be coupled with self-affirmation. Interestingly enough, Kierkegaard's model of *faith* provides us with precisely such a structure.⁴²

Fear and Trembling (1843),⁴³ in which he analyses faith in a way that is as rigorous and enlightening as it is poignant and poetic, is probably Kierkegaard's most famous work. Published under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, in this text Kierkegaard dives into the depths of faith by focusing on the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac. Alongside the dramatic story of Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard also discusses the nature of faith by reflecting on the much quieter, and definitely less outrageous, story of the unfulfilled romantic relationship between a young man and a princess. And in both cases Kierkegaard posits what he calls 'infinite resignation' as a necessary condition for faith. What does he mean by 'infinite resignation'? It is 'infinite' in the sense that it is an unending and encompassing *position* (as opposed to a local *reaction* to a passing event), and it is 'resignation' in the sense of acknowledging that the situation is not being governed by one's will. Let us focus on Abraham's story.

In the case of Abraham, his infinite resignation amounts to accepting that Isaac does not 'belong' to him. Yes, he is Isaac's father, and yes, Isaac's presence in his life is what he desires most of all. Nevertheless, he has no way of controlling and securing Isaac's lasting presence in his life. Now, although God's demand to sacrifice Isaac manifests this fact in a particularly horrifying way, the fact itself – namely, the inability to secure the beloved's presence in the lover's life – is a general truth. Inasmuch as the beloved is free (by virtue of possessing their own will) on the one hand, and vulnerable to loss (by virtue of existing in time) on the other, the

⁴² The 'application' of the structure of faith onto love is an idea I elaborate on in Krishek (2009). There, as well as in Krishek (2022a), I discuss in more depth the key ideas of 'infinite resignation' and 'the double movement' of faith. Here, however, I present, for the first time, what I term 'active attentiveness', as capturing the desirable attitude of love when modelled in the structure of faith.

⁴³ Kierkegaard (1983). Hereafter, FT.

lover's will *cannot* be the last word. Accordingly, then, to 'make the movement'⁴⁴ of infinite resignation is to accept that no matter how strong our will is, the beloved is not 'ours' to hold: we do not, and cannot, 'possess' him or her. In this sense, the position of infinite resignation is a painful one because from this perspective the presence of the beloved is constantly overshadowed by their potential loss.

The realization that X is not one's 'own' works against the human tendency to take the good things in one's life for granted. In this regard, infinite resignation is like opening one's eyes to the value of the beloved. Further, if selfishness means to relate to X from the point of view of how one benefits from X, then infinite resignation – which excludes that possibility (because acknowledging that X is not one's own prevents such an instrumental attitude) – is like an antidote against selfishness. In this sense, the position of infinite resignation is akin to self-denial. How? In self-denial, as explained earlier, we move ourselves aside (as it were); we make ourselves 'absent'. In infinite resignation, on the other hand, the absence in question is the potential absence of the beloved. Emotionally, the effect is of course very different, but morally the effect is the same: both attitudes force us to focus on the beloved and perceive their value as fully as possible.

Self-denial and infinite resignation, then, are like two sides of the same coin, with the coin in question being a 'cleansed' relation to the beloved, shaped *not* by what the *lover* wants but rather by the lover's acknowledgement and appreciation of the *beloved's* value. And like self-denial, infinite resignation – when the overall position – does not allow for joy. After all, in infinite resignation the beloved's potential loss is constantly present for the lover, being thereby a source of pain, not joy. It is difficult to experience joy in the presence of that which one conceives of as ultimately *absent*. Infinite resignation alone, then, is not enough for love.

The insufficiency of resignation is precisely Kierkegaard's point when discussing the nature of *faith*. Presenting four imagined versions of the Binding, each depicting an Abraham who is willing to sacrifice Isaac and yet fails in his faith, it is clear that Kierkegaard takes infinite resignation to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for faith. Rather, the test that the real Abraham withstood was a test of *trust*: to succeed, despite the extremely dire circumstances of the Binding, in trusting God to fulfil His promise regarding Isaac. That is, while acting in a way that appears to lead (to the best of his knowledge) to Isaac's *death*, to succeed in trusting

⁴⁴ As Kierkegaard puts it. See, for example, FT, 41.

that Isaac's *life* would continue. And Abraham does succeed. According to Kierkegaard, he is a 'knight of faith' by virtue of his trust in God (and goodness) even in the midst of the terrible and horrifying situation of the Binding. Furthermore, this trust, says Kierkegaard, is manifested by Abraham's 'really fervent joy on receiving Isaac and by his needing no preparation and no time to rally to finitude and its joy' (FT, 37).

Thus, faith is a 'double movement' of infinite resignation on the one hand and 'receiving back' on the other. Such a 'receiving' amounts to the ability to trust and be open to the givenness – which is beyond our powers – of that which we at the same time infinitely renounce. This trusting openness involves not only the ability to hope for the continuing presence of the X we infinitely renounce, but also a reaffirmation of our will. Namely, while making the movement of infinite resignation – with its moral gravitas – we 'return' to 'the powers of immediacy' (see [Section 2.3](#)); namely, those powers that constitute our interest in the beloved.

From the vantage point of infinite resignation (and self-denial), the 'return' to 'the powers of immediacy' constitutes an unselfish *interest* in the beloved. Love, it is important to recall, is a relation of *two*: the lover must be involved; his or her self cannot be only denied. 'The powers' that attach Jane to Edward – her interests, sensitivities, drives, inclinations, yearnings, and so on – must be engaged. Kierkegaard of course knows that, but while the Kierkegaard of *Works of Love* regards these powers as inevitably selfish, the Kierkegaard of *Fear and Trembling* opens the door to the possibility of securing these powers against selfishness by 'returning' to them while simultaneously performing the movement of infinite resignation. Such a 'double movement' of *love* forms a position that I call *active attentiveness*. It is to fully attend to the beloved while at the same time being involved in an active, self-affirming way. Only from such a position can joy arise.

Joy is also crucial to proper love when it comes to our interaction with the 'non-preferred' (i.e., those who are not related to us in special ways) as well; namely, in the context of fraternal love. And, indeed, although *Works of Love* is focused on the position of self-denial as the hallmark of love, we nevertheless find hints of a position more in the direction of 'active attentiveness' in the following:

Imagine a person who prepared a banquet and invited as his guests the lame, the blind, the cripples, and the beggars. ... imagine that this man who gave the banquet had a friend to whom he said, 'Yesterday I gave a great banquet' ... he [the friend] would be surprised, and he would perhaps say, 'It is a strange use of language to call that kind of a gathering

a banquet' ... But so scrupulous is Christian equality and its use of language that it requires not only that you shall feed the poor; it requires that you shall call it a banquet. (WL, 81, 82)⁴⁵

The friend is surprised because he thinks that it is more fitting to call such a gathering 'an act of charity' and not a 'banquet' (see WL, 81). What is it, then, about a banquet that makes it different from an act of charity? Banquet is a party, and a party is an event that involves joy. The host not only *gives* (as does the 'host' of a charity event) but also *receives*. She is not only in a position of self-denial (as in a case of charity) but rather attends to her guests with the kind of interest that involves her in interaction with them and is the ground for her joy.⁴⁶

Further, the idea of charity is based on a very specific conception of 'giving' that self-denial indeed addresses. This is the focus on those needs of the receiver that can be supplied regardless of the 'needs' of the giver (her specific interests, tastes, inclinations, and so on). The idea of a banquet, however, takes into account another important need of the receiver (the guest): their need to be *welcomed* and *wanted*. Namely, the 'receiver', in the context of a banquet, wants to be appreciated for *who he is*; he wants the host to be *interested* in him and find *joy* in his presence.⁴⁷ The good host, then, does not treat her guests through self-denial alone; rather, it is more accurate to describe her position as that of 'active attentiveness'. Such an attentiveness means that she not only gives but also receives – her 'needs' are also satisfied – and this reception is *desired* by her guest. For this to happen, she must be fully involved in the situation: that is, with her powers of immediacy – secured by self-denial – in play.

A further implication is that in active attentiveness the host (the lover) attends to her guest (the beloved) in a way that involves them both not only as neighbours but also as *selves*. Each of them is present in the interaction as an individual, a person with a name. They are neighbours in the 'thick' sense of being a 'self', which expresses the *particular shape* of humanness/God's image that each possesses. This particular shape is constituted by the qualities unique to each and is properly reflected in and addressed by,

⁴⁵ Compare Hanson (2022), where a reference to this quote is brought to substantiate Hanson's thesis that neighbourly love, for Kierkegaard, should possess some of the qualities of preferential, romantic love.

⁴⁶ For an elaboration on the practical attainability of fraternal love – namely, on how it is possible, in practice, to love the stranger and the enemy – see Krishek (2022a, chapter 5).

⁴⁷ In the same way that the romantic beloved, say Edward, wants the lover, Jane, to be *interested* in him and get satisfaction from his presence. The last thing he wants is to be only taken care of by Jane disinterestedly. Indeed, nobody wants a disinterested lover.

‘the powers of immediacy’ of each of them (respectively). An interaction of proper love, then, is an active attentiveness – structured in the doubleness of self-denial coupled with self-affirmation – that is performed by a ‘self’ and addressed to a ‘self’.

The idea of proper love being in the image of faith is implicit in Kierkegaard’s own pondering on romantic love in *Fear and Trembling*. Imagining a different ending to the unhappy love story of the young man and the princess, he says that ‘the knight of faith’, while ‘see[ing] the sword hanging over the beloved’s head’, does not ‘find rest in the pain of resignation’ but rather ‘find[s] joy’ in the presence of his beloved (see FT, 50). The one who loves properly has to acknowledge ‘the sword’: he has to accept the fact that the beloved is not his ‘own’ and may be ‘taken away’ from him (by time, circumstances, or will other than his). In other words, he must perform infinite resignation. At the same time, however, and precisely from this position of infinite resignation and self-denial, he must affirm himself. Only by making this ‘double movement’ is his love complete.

It is, of course, clear that such a position is difficult to attain. It requires strenuous moral and spiritual effort, which does not come spontaneously. Thus, although the love *commandment* may seem to be needed only when it comes to those whom we do not love spontaneously, this, as was already emphasized, is far from being the case. Romantic love should be subject to the love commandment no less than should love for a stranger. *Not*, obviously, in the sense that we should love every person romantically, but rather in the sense that when loving romantically – we should also adhere to the commandment so that we love *properly*. We may therefore think of the commandment as an armour – thin and invisible, yet strong and resistant – that protects love from the danger of selfishness. And we need this armour because the danger of selfishness (i.e., among other things, the danger of blindness to the beloved’s value and taking the relationship for granted) may not only harm love but kill it.

The relevance of the love commandment to *any* form of love, and its demand that *every* human interaction be that of proper love, amounts to the universality of love. And as we will see in the [next](#) – and final – section, to love universally is desirable not only morally and spiritually but also existentially.

4 Loving as a Way of Life

[I]f you will understand yourself and life, then it seems that [love] should not need to be commanded, because to love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living. (WL, 375)

4.1 One's Relationship with God

4.1.1 Resting in God

In *The Sickness unto Death* (referred to in [Section 3.2](#)), Kierkegaard set forth what he viewed as the 'life worth living'. While there is much that needs to be (and has been) considered in determining what, exactly, is meant by a life worth living, this is not the goal of the current study.⁴⁸ Instead, positing that a life worth living means an (objectively) good life that is also (subjectively) *experienced* as good, the current discussion will demonstrate how Kierkegaard's view of love reflects such a conception of a life worth living and will examine *how*, in Kierkegaard's understanding, one can achieve this goal.

At an early stage of *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes what he undoubtedly took to be a state of living a 'worthy life' in terms of being a self that 'rests transparently in the power that established it' (SUD, 13). Assuming (as is commonly accepted) that by 'the power that established the self' Kierkegaard means God, this intriguing phrase raises two interrelated questions, which the present sub-section (4.1) will attempt to answer. First, what does it mean 'to rest transparently in God', and, second, why does Kierkegaard use this image to depict the state of living a worthy life?

Phenomenologically speaking, 'to rest' (or to be 'grounded', as some translations have it⁴⁹) is to be fully present, to be completely and wholeheartedly immersed in the relevant situation in which that resting takes place. One is not directed elsewhere or attempting to get somewhere or achieve something, but is rather simply where one is – 'anchored' as opposed to being absentminded, alienated, or detached. Supposing, then, that this is the state of resting – what does it mean to rest *in God*? One way to understand this statement is metaphorically: as a picturesque way to describe the believer's full attendance to God's will. For the believer to 'rest transparently in God', then, is to acknowledge God's will and completely adhere to it. In such a state there is no struggle or rebellion against God's will, and nothing disturbs or overshadows the accordance between the will of the believer and that of God. However, I would like to suggest that there is a more literal way to understand this kind of 'resting'.

⁴⁸ Presumably, a 'worthy life' is the kind of life that a person not only *should* live but also *desires* to live. The kind of life that meets these two conditions (i.e., is 'worthy' both objectively and subjectively) is often referred to as 'meaningful'. It is beyond the scope of this Element to examine how my view of Kierkegaard intersects with the ongoing philosophical discussion concerning life's meaning. For an initial engagement of this sort, see Krishek (2025b). See also Hanson (2021) and Furtak (2025a), for interesting connections between Kierkegaard's philosophy and the question of life's meaning.

⁴⁹ See Kierkegaard (2008, 2023).

From the point of view of the believer, God (as traditionally understood) is that which is good (unquestionably, fully, and purely).⁵⁰ For the sake of discussion, let us suppose that this is true: that such a dimension – namely the being and presence of sheer goodness – exists in our reality. Thus, inasmuch as ‘resting in God’ is the closest one can come to God – with ‘rest’ meaning, as we said, a state of being ‘anchored’ – then to rest in God is the strongest possible experience of goodness. This explains the idea of ‘transparency’. In the context of such an experience, there is nothing that hinders, confuses, clouds, or distracts one from the profound experience of goodness. The transparent resting in God, then, amounts to fully experiencing goodness – even within the limitations of worldly existence, which as such necessarily entails pain and suffering.

And what does it mean to ‘experience goodness’? Again, phenomenologically speaking, I suggest it means to feel joy in one’s very existence; to feel the strength and the value entailed in being alive. In this sense, such an experience is a life-affirming stance, which comes in the form of vitality. In other words, to experience goodness is to feel joy in one’s very living, with joy being a kind of life force – a stance of attaching oneself to life (as it were) in a feat of affirmation. Hence, although the image is of rest, this by no means indicates impotence or a withdrawal from life. On the contrary, ‘resting transparently in God’ is a state of vitality and life affirmation. We can therefore understand why Kierkegaard uses this particular image to describe the worthy life. To attain this ‘transparent resting’ means to be anchored in existence so that one is deeply acquainted with goodness in whatever one experiences, including even during times of hardship and adversity. In other words, attaining this state means that despite living in a world full of chaos, injustice, evil, and pain, one nevertheless has God, or goodness, as an anchor.⁵¹

4.1.2 God as a Middle Term

For Kierkegaard, then, the life worth living is one defined by an experience that entertains a constant, lived, encounter with God (‘resting’ in Him). However, before moving on to inquire (in the next sub-section)

⁵⁰ In this connection, see Rudd (2012, chapters 2 and 6). See also Pattison (2008).

⁵¹ Returning to the question of what, in willing good for the beloved, the lover is actually willing (see note 23 in Section 2), we can now say that the lover wills the beloved to rest in God. As I soon demonstrate (see Sections 4.2 and 4.3), such a rest is only possible by ‘becoming oneself’, which is itself made possible by loving another. Hence, to will good for the beloved is, ultimately, to will that he or she will love. This, note, coheres with the idea of ‘resting in God’ also from the direction of the idea that ‘God is love’. After all, if ‘God is love’, then ‘resting in Him’ is to rest in love – that is, to love.

the conditions for achieving this kind of life, it is important to take into account another Kierkegaardian concept, namely his description of God as ‘the middle term’ between lover and beloved. Kierkegaard writes: ‘Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person—God—a person; that is, that God is the middle term’ (WL, 107, emphasis in the original). What does he mean by that?

As discussed in [Section 2](#), Kierkegaard’s major concern in *Works of Love* is to delineate the kind of love that he takes to be genuine or correct, as opposed to love marred by selfishness (which at its worst is not love at all but only egoism in disguise). His somewhat misleading rhetoric notwithstanding, Kierkegaard does *not* take preferential love to be *essentially* selfish. Rather, his point is that while preferential love is the kind of love that responds to the *distinctive* qualities of the beloved – whether intrinsic (e.g., the beloved’s wisdom) or relational (e.g., her being our daughter) – love *as it should be* responds to the *common* quality that all humans universally share: being a neighbour. Accordingly, Kierkegaard’s claim, as we saw, is that for love – *any* love (romantic, familial, fraternal, and so on) – to be proper, it should discern and respond to the quality of ‘being a neighbour’ that each and every person possesses.

In light of this, it is fitting to understand Kierkegaard’s assertion that God is ‘the middle term’ as meaning that in ‘proper’ love the conception of the beloved as a neighbour – i.e., someone who is connected to God – mediates between the lovers. That is, in proper love (according to Kierkegaard), the lover does not respond only to the distinctive qualities of the beloved that appeal to the lover’s preferences but first and foremost to the beloved’s being created by God and in His image. We may call this understanding of ‘God as the middle term’ the moral interpretation, which is, indeed, the one commonly accepted by numerous prominent scholars.⁵²

However, further to the idea of ‘resting in God’, I want to suggest, again, a more literal understanding of the ‘middle term’ notion. Thus, in addition to the ‘moral interpretation’ (and compatible with it), we can offer an ‘existential interpretation’ of this notion, taking at face value the idea of God being a third in a love relationship. According to such an interpretation, to describe God as the middle term between the lover and the beloved is to perceive God as being *present* in the relationship. Returning to the conception of God being (among other things) sheer goodness, we can say that God’s presence in the relationship amounts precisely to the lover’s experiencing goodness *by virtue of loving*. In this way, the idea of

⁵² See Evans (2004), Ferreira (2001), and Lippitt (2013).

'God as the middle term', just like the image of 'resting transparently in God', manifests the state of living a life 'worth living'.

These two different ways to describe the worthy life have in common the idea of having and experiencing God's presence in one's life. However, while the second of these ('God as the middle term') explicitly involves another person (i.e., apart from oneself and God), the first of these ('resting in God') seems to exclude any third party. This is unsettling: how is it that the ideal of worthy life is to work towards a relationship that seems to be a relationship between oneself and God alone?⁵³ My answer is simple: not only is there no exclusion, but in fact one's loving relationship with another is *crucial* for attaining the state of 'resting in God'. Here we finally return to the question with which we began: what does it take, in Kierkegaard's view, to achieve a life worth living? To answer this question, another factor must be added to the already complex picture of one's relationship with God and with the human other: namely, one's relationship with *oneself*.⁵⁴

4.2 One's Relationship with Oneself

4.2.1 Despairing Over Oneself

If a person is to despair over himself, he must be aware of having a self; ... it is over this that he despairs, not over the earthly or something earthly, but over himself. (SUD, 62)

Kierkegaard identifies the ideal state of 'resting in God' with faith (which is yet another name for the worthy life, in Kierkegaard's view), and he is quite explicit in describing its conditions. 'The formula for faith,' he says, is 'in relating ... to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in [God]' (SUD, 49). For one to 'rest in God', then, one must not only 'relate' to oneself but also 'will' to be oneself. What does this mean?

In Section 3, I discussed Kierkegaard's conception of the self and posited that to be a self is to be an individual in the robust sense of the word. Let us think about the character of Edward Rochester in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. To be an individual in the robust sense of the word, means not only

⁵³ For reservation in this spirit see Davenport (2013), Elrod (1987), Evans (2006), Walsh (1987), van Stee (2015). For a response, see Krishek (2016).

⁵⁴ Hence, in inquiring into the conditions for 'resting in God', we will see that within one's love for another is embedded not only the relationship with God – as expressed by the notion of God being 'the middle term' in a love relationship – but also with oneself. This, please note, is entirely in line with the love commandment, which includes both one's relation to God (the 'shall') and to oneself (the 'as yourself'). We will return to this 'triangularity' in Section 4.3.

to be Edward – a person with a name – but to be *essentially* Edward: a person with an *irreplaceable* name. At the same time, Edward’s individuality, or selfhood, is primarily in a state of potential, so Edward’s task is to actualize it and *become* the Edward that he can, and should, be. Accordingly, the crucial distinction that Kierkegaard draws is not between ‘to be a self’ or ‘*not* to be a self’ (the latter is impossible: every person is a self), but rather between ‘to be a self’ and ‘to be one’s *intended* self’. The task is to actualize one’s potential to the fullest: to become not just *a* self (i.e., *any* version of Edward), but rather the self that one is *intended* to be (i.e., *the best* version of Edward). If the potential represents the core of Edward’s individuality – i.e., the image of God (or the quality of humanness) in a *particular* shape – then, to reiterate, Edward’s task is to actualize this potential to the fullest possible extent.⁵⁵

The task of *becoming* one’s *intended* self is the responsibility of the individual. Consider again the oak tree, which has the potential to become a perfect oak (as opposed to a perfect pine tree) but lacks any ability to impact – and thus any responsibility for – this becoming. A human being, however, *does* have the capacity, and hence the responsibility, to become a better or a lesser version of themselves. This is what Kierkegaard means when talking about the self ‘relating to itself’. The oak tree cannot ‘relate’ to itself, but Edward *can*: he has the power to reflect upon the kind of person that he is – with his particular abilities, his strengths and weaknesses, his virtues and flaws – and decide what kind of Edward he *wills* to be. This is exactly what the ‘formula for faith’ maintains: relating to oneself is not sufficient for faith; one also has to *will* to be oneself.

After all, while self-relating is integral to being human – every person has the ability, hence responsibility, to become the self (say, Edward) they are – the challenge is to have the *right* relation to oneself; to become the Edward one is *intended* to be. And this is where ‘willing’ comes in. It is not enough for Edward to discover himself and to understand himself – he has to will to be himself; to accept himself and affirm it. To explain what this means, let us now examine the state of *failing* to become one’s intended self, which Kierkegaard calls ‘despair’. Elsewhere I discuss in detail the map of despair, with its manifold forms and stages, as Kierkegaard depicts it in *The Sickness unto Death*.⁵⁶ Here, however, I will only present a short portrayal of the ‘Via Dolorosa’ (so to speak) of despair.

⁵⁵ See again Section 3.2. It can also be added that while the potential is Edward’s core, the actualization results in his ‘individual persona’. For an explanation of the latter notion, see Krishek (2021).

⁵⁶ See Krishek (2022b).

The journey to becoming one's intended self is a painful one; indeed, Kierkegaard describes it using the rather harsh phrase of '*grinding* into shape' (see SUD, 33). Moreover, there are no possible detours: the only option is to move forward through this challenging shaping. And while there are different degrees and stages to despair, this state is universal: as long as we do not become our intended self, we are, according to Kierkegaard, in a state of despair. Accordingly, *healing* from despair is achieved only when we become the self we are intended to be (which is also the state of faith and 'resting in God'). But for this to happen, we need to understand, first, that we possess a God-bestowed potential whose actualization is *our* responsibility and, second, to *will* to be that particular self. Thus, an individual, say Edward, needs to willingly accept his being a person in a particular image of God – the 'particular shape' that determines his identity as Edward – and to willingly take upon himself the task of fulfilling this 'image' to the utmost.

It is in this sense that despair – the *failure* to become oneself – is a spiritual sickness, namely, the kind of sickness rooted not in one's body or mind, but in a further dimension of being human: that of being connected to God. As such, despair is not a passing phase but an ontological *state*, with the despairer experiencing (occasionally) mental predicaments such as anxiety, distress, depression, unrest, or dissatisfaction. These are the *symptoms* that indicate that one is sick, that is, in despair. And although one should be careful not to confuse the symptoms with the disease – and in particular not to assume that a lack of symptoms indicates health – these mental symptoms do serve an important role in guiding a person to self-understanding. How do they arise?

In characterizing the human being, Kierkegaard employs the categories not only of 'the temporal and the eternal' (see again [Section 3.2](#)) but also of 'finitude and necessity' on the one hand, and 'infinite and freedom' on the other (see SUD, 13). This can be understood as describing the state of worldly life, in the context of which a person is concurrently *limited* (in time, capacities, and strengths) as well as capable of *transcending* these limitations. To transcend, please note, is *not* to eliminate. This is precisely the point of being simultaneously *both* finite and infinite, subject to necessities and free.

Thus, when one understands oneself *only* in terms of limitations *or* transcendence, one is in despair. One has taken the wrong path in one's journey towards self-realization; a path that leads, inevitably, to a dead end. However, warning signs appear repeatedly along such a fallacious trail: these are the mental symptoms of despair (anxiety, unrest, and so on) that

arise whenever a person faces his or her limitations and either ignores these limitations or succumbs to them. To illustrate this point, I will loosely (and somewhat speculatively) give an example from *Jane Eyre*, using Edward's point of view.

Before marrying Bertha, Edward lived his life like a child, in the sense that he was not particularly aware of either his capacities or his limitations. Lacking any deep reflection on his condition as a human being, he also lacked awareness of being a self, an individual, who must navigate life in accordance with the kind of individual that he is. In this sense, he lived an 'immediate' kind of existence, guided by his more or less immediate desires. And it was while having this particular attitude to living, that he married Bertha. However, as a result of this life-changing decision, he was forced to encounter his limits, since the marriage turned out to be a fatal mistake that he could not undo. Divorce not being an option, Edward found himself confined to a life he didn't want to live. This was not only because of Bertha's mental condition but rather because – not really loving each other – they soon came to detest one another.

Given this miserable marriage, restlessness and depression overcame him: Edward acknowledged that he was in despair. Nevertheless, he was profoundly mistaken in his understanding of his state because he took 'the earthly' – namely, the relevant loss in the world – to be the reason for his despair (thinking that all would have been well if only the marriage had not taken place). 'In itself,' as Kierkegaard says, 'to lose the things of this world is not to despair; yet this is what he talks about, and this is what he calls despairing' (SUD, 51).⁵⁷ The *real* reason for Edward's despair is not the failed marriage but rather he himself. However, to understand this, 'he must be aware of having a self' (see again the quote that opens this sub-section).

Encountering limitations, then, has the potential to edify, forcing a person to realize that what happens to them is not only the result of misfortune; it is also, and more deeply, the result of who they are and how they act in the world. And indeed, Edward comes to realize this, and the object of his despair becomes primarily himself. He despises the weakness, vanity, self-indulgence, and frivolousness that led him to live a life he does not like. He views himself as brutish and corrupted, and sees no way out of his desolate situation. He sees, in other words, no way of redemption; of becoming a self he could affirm.

⁵⁷ It is important to emphasize that this does *not* mean that 'the things of this world' are disregarded by Kierkegaard as unimportant or not valuable so that losing them does not count. The point is that losing them – while undoubtedly a reason for justified pain and sorrow – is not the reason for *despair*.

Falling in love with Jane, however, he discovers new, as well as forgotten, aspects of himself, and he wills to be *that* new (version of) Edward. However, he is still in error because he fails to understand that he is *not* the only one determining who he is. In his euphoric state of being in love, he discovers his ability to change himself; accordingly, he feels that he is his own and sole master. However, this is not the case. His position now is akin to that of the despairer who ‘severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it ... [he] wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be’ (SUD, 68). In other words, Edward is blind to having a core; he fails to understand that he possesses a (divinely bestowed) potential that determines who he can (and cannot) be. He rather holds a Sartre-like conception of radical freedom, believing that everything is possible for him and subject to his own will.⁵⁸

But then he again encounters painful limitations. Jane, who is horrified to discover that Edward is in fact a married man, refuses to follow through with their plans to marry. Despite his desperate begging, she insists that it would be impossible for them to be together as long as he is involved (morally speaking) in the other relationship. And eventually she flees: leaving him, and the promise of a shared future, behind.⁵⁹ Anxious, desperate, and depressed – Edward has to, once again, acknowledge his despair.

In Brontë’s novel, Edward gets a second chance for redemption.⁶⁰ Having experienced the consuming pain of losing Jane (as well as the loss of his health and part of his estate, due to a fire set by Bertha, who was killed in the ensuing flames), he was ‘ground into shape’. That is, he took the right path to discovering, humbly, the core of being ‘Edward’, with both his strengths and his weaknesses. With the help of Jane, who returns to him, he can now, finally, accept himself. He not only ‘relates’ to himself (understanding who he is and his responsibility for his self) but also ‘wills’ to be himself. He becomes himself – the self he is intended to be – through a long, painful process of self-realization: a process that includes self-discovery, self-understanding, self-acceptance, and self-shaping.

⁵⁸ For an elaboration on the ‘Sartrean’ nature of this kind of despair, see Krishek (2023).

⁵⁹ For an account of Jane’s perspective, see Krishek (2022a, chapter 7).

⁶⁰ We could easily imagine a different, darker ending to Edward’s journey (say, for example, if, rather than loving Jane, he would have become resentful about her leaving him), in which his encounter with limitations – from the standpoint of taking himself to be the master of himself – would result not in becoming himself but rather in becoming demonic. On this stage of despair, which is the severest, see my discussion of despair in Krishek (2022a, chapter 6).

But what does it take to arrive at the desirable state of becoming the self that one is intended to be? Given that ‘becoming oneself’ is the condition that Kierkegaard posits for ‘resting in God’ – which is Kierkegaard’s idea of the life worth living – this question is of utmost importance. And so is the answer: as is also implied in my portrayal of Edward’s journey to self-hood, the process of *becoming oneself* takes place in the context of *loving another*.

4.2.2 Loving Another

God is Love and therefore we can be like God only in loving [the neighbour], just as we also ... can only be *God’s co-workers—in love*. (WL, 62–63, emphasis in the original)

A straightforward reading of this assertion would be that given that God’s nature is to love, then if we want to be ‘like Him’ we should do what is most typical of Him, namely love other humans. Now, doing what is most typical of God – loving – is another expression of the notion of being created in God’s image. As elaborated in [Section 3.2](#), the idea of being created ‘in’ the image of God can be understood to mean that we possess the qualities that constitute the ‘image’ of God: rationality, creativity, free will, and love. Of all these, love is prior. As Kierkegaard says: ‘what gift of God is comparable to love, which he implanted in the human heart’ (WL, 163). Thus, although all these qualities are unified in one image – the image of God – we can understand the other qualities as supportive of the central quality of loving. In other words, divine loving – the kind of loving typical of God and which was ‘implanted in the human heart’ – is not an instinct, impulse, or simply a blind passion. It is reflective (and in this sense rational), creative, and based on free will. To be created in God’s image, then, is to be, primarily, (not a rational but rather) a *loving* being (with loving, as just discussed, being inclusive of, but not defined by, rationality). Thus, loving is that which determines our humanity.

To be ‘like God’, then, is to act in accordance with our ‘divine image’. However, as suggested earlier, each person possesses God’s image *not* in a general form but rather in a particular shape unique to him or her. That is, while both Edward and Jane are created in God’s image, the shape of this image is different in each of them.⁶¹ Thus, although both Edward and

⁶¹ See again [Section 3.2](#).

Jane are 'loving beings', their loving nature is expressed through different qualities, inclinations, talents, and so on. Further to this, 'to be like God' is not only to fulfil one's human nature in general but, more specifically, to fulfil one's nature as *Edward* or *Jane* in particular. In other words, if 'to be like God' is to fulfil the *individualized* image of God that every human possesses – namely, to fulfil one's potential selfhood and become *the self that God intends one to be* – then to be 'like God' is, in fact, to become one's intended self.

Reading the quote in this way – namely, that to be like God *is* to be in God's (particular) image – it becomes clear in what sense we are God's co-workers. God bestows the potential, and the task of the human being is to actualize this potential. Thus, if becoming one's intended self entails both being 'like God' (reflecting His image) and working with God (actualizing one's God-bestowed potential), then Kierkegaard's assertion that this desirable state can be achieved 'only in loving' makes loving a necessary condition for becoming oneself. Thus, becoming oneself – *one's intended self* – depends on loving, properly, another.

4.3 Love and the Life 'Worth Living'

To recap: In Kierkegaard's view, a life that is both *good* and *experienced* as good – the worthy life – is a life of 'resting in God'. And according to Kierkegaard's thesis, such a state of resting in God is only achieved when one becomes one's intended self, which, in turn, can only be achieved when loving properly another; that is, when loving in the way instructed by the love commandment. Accordingly, 'to love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living' (WL, 375). Love, in other words, is good for us: the love commandment is not only about what we are *required* to do but also about how we are *recommended* to live. And in Kierkegaard's view of the worthy life, the threefold relationships of the commandment – with God, with oneself, and with another – are inseparable.

Hence, if we were to visualize the worthy life as a geometrical form, it would be a *triangle*. To begin with, the structure of proper love is that of a triad. The very idea of 'God as a middle term' makes love a relationship of three. It is easy to imagine a triangle here, with God forming one vertex and with the self and the other (lover and beloved) forming the other two. But the 'worthy life' triangle is formed not only by virtue of the three participants (self-God-other) but by virtue of the three sets of

relationships that these participants maintain: lover and beloved, lover and God, and lover and himself/herself. In a person's life, these three sets of relationships are constantly developing into (ideally) their perfect fulfilment: loving another *properly*, becoming the self one is *intended* to be, and coming *closer* to God. They are the mutually supportive constituents of a process that circularly feeds itself (again, ideally) in its advancement forward.

It is interesting, in this connection, to note Kierkegaard's reflection on the myth of creation:

How deeply the need of love is rooted in human nature! ... We read in Holy Scripture, 'God said, it is not good for man to be alone'. So the woman was *taken* from the man's side and *given* to him for companionship ... Throughout all ages everyone who has deeply pondered human nature has acknowledged this innate need for companionship. (WL, 154, emphasis in the original)

In Kierkegaard's view, then, the process (to become oneself, to love properly, to come to God) begins with an intimate connection to God, the nature of which is ontological: one is related to God by virtue of being created by God and in His image. However, regardless of one's acknowledgment of the relation, being created in this way – *in the image of God who is love* – means that (the capacity for) loving is that which is most typical of one's nature. Accordingly, one *must* love; this is the (volitional, rational, and emotional) force that drives and motivates one in one's living. In other words, the 'need of love' – which is both the need to love and the need to be loved – lies at the very heart of human nature and is therefore the impetus (so to speak) of human existence.

Hence, the human being must love. And loving – as previously demonstrated – is eo ipso the way to self-realization and to getting closer to God. Thus, if the ideal is to progress from being ontologically related to God to conducting a full relationship with God,⁶² then what allows this progression is loving others. Now, when loving, one experiences all kinds of situations and discovers – painfully – the differences between proper love and love which is not so proper. Hence the commandment,

⁶² Such a relationship amounts to acknowledging and understanding that one is a divinely named self – i.e., created in a particular shape of God's image – and to will to be that self. Hence, it is clear that being ontologically related to God does not entail a full – or even minimal – relationship with God, as a person can well be unaware of, alienated from, or deny their relation to God. (In the same way that being biologically related to one's parent does not necessarily mean having a relationship with that parent.)

which teaches proper love. As previously elaborated (see [Sections 3.2](#) and [3.3](#)), to love properly is to love a *self*, with one's love structured along the model of Kierkegaardian faith. That is, the commandment teaches us an attitude of *active attentiveness*, structured in the 'double movement' of self-denial and self-affirmation, and guided by one's adherence to God's will.

And so we come full circle: one begins with an intimate relation to God and seeks to arrive, ideally, at a full relationship of 'resting in Him'. Between these two 'points', one traverses a long and complex path, that necessarily and crucially involves relationships both with oneself and with others. In this way, from the first moment of one's existence in the world, one is immersed in a triangle of relationships between three parties: self, God, and neighbour (another self). And each of these relationships depends on, is fed by, and supports, the other two.

Accordingly, the picture presented here is *not* a teleological one: it is *not* the case that one of the relationships serves as a means to achieve another. Rather, the three constitutive elements of the worthy life – loving the neighbour, becoming oneself, and forging a relationship with God – work *together*. In this triangle, as in all triangles, none of the 'vertices' (self – God – other) constitutes the ultimate destination, and none of the stated goals – becoming one's intended self, arriving at the highest relationship with God, and loving properly the neighbour – stands alone. For a triangle to be a *triangle*, we need all three vertices (the three participants) and all three sides (the three sets of relationships).

The picture that Kierkegaard presents of the worthy life, then, is a unified and harmonious picture of interdependent relationships. And it is also *dynamic*: the trilateral goal of the good life is constantly in motion. It is a matter of becoming (oneself), arriving at (God), and loving (the neighbour). Accordingly, although the image of the ideal life is that of 'resting' in God, it is a rest that is opposed to struggle, *not* to motion. Thus, 'rest' in this connection does not signify coming to a standstill but rather being at peace: with oneself, with others, and with life itself.

And the key to this kind of life is the love commandment. Demanding that love be universal – namely, applicable to every given human interaction – the commandment construes loving as all encompassing. Living in the light of the love commandment, then, love ceases to be only one ingredient of life among many and becomes a way of living. Loving others is the only path to oneself and to God (goodness) alike – the only path to a life worth living.

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In memory of Hersh Goldberg-Polin*

*Hersh Goldberg-Polin was abducted by Hamas from a music festival on 7 October 2023 and survived in captivity for almost a year. In August 2024 he was shot dead by his captors, along with five other hostages, when the Israeli army forces approached the place in Gaza where they were held. Hersh, as many others, was forced to pay with his life for the refusal of the Israeli government to end the war.